

Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts

Conor Carville



SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE VISUAL ARTS

Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts is the first book to comprehensively assess Beckett's knowledge of art, art history and art criticism. In his lifetime, Beckett thought deeply about visual culture from ancient Egyptian statuary to Dutch realism, from Quattrocento painting to the modernists and after. Drawing on a wide range of published and unpublished sources, this book traces in forensic detail the development of Beckett's understanding of painting in particular, as that understanding developed from the late 1920s to the 1970s. In doing so, it demonstrates that Beckett's thinking about art and aesthetics radically changed in the course of his life, often directly responding to the intellectual and historical contexts in which he found himself. Moving fluently between art history, philosophy, literary analysis and historical context, *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts* rethinks the trajectory of Beckett's career, and reorients his relationship to modernism, late modernism and the avant-gardes.

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University of Reading



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For my mother and father

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Introduction

Beckett and the Image

Like many of us the young Samuel Beckett did not relish the idea of working for a living. As far as we know his only conventional employment was as a lecturer in Modern Languages at Trinity College Dublin from 1930 to 1931. He resigned after just over a year. Perhaps this is why Beckett's early novels and short stories, most famously *Murphy*, written in London while being supported by his mother, are full of those known in French slang as *voyou desoeuvre*, 'lazy rascals': young men – often artists or writers – to whom the very idea of selling their labour is anathema.¹

So it comes as some surprise to find Beckett writing the following to his friend Thomas MacGreevy on 9 September 1933:

[i]n a moment of gush I applied for a job of assistant at the National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, and got Charles Prentice and Jack Yeats to act as referees. I think I'd be happy there for a time among the pigeons and not too far from the French charmers in the Garrick. Apart from my conyser-ship that can just separate Uccello from a handsaw I could cork the post as well as another.²

Beckett had spent July and August of 1932 in London, putting off his return to Dublin after having left his lecturing job the previous Christmas. It was probably during this summer that he first began to visit London's National Gallery regularly. He had met Thomas MacGreevy, the recipient of the letter quoted, in 1929 in Paris. Beckett was twenty-three at that point and an exchange *lecteur* at the École Normale Supérieure. MacGreevy, aged thirty-five, was editing the French avant-garde art

¹ The term was used in 1952 by Alexandre Kojève to describe the protagonists of three novels by Raymond Queneau and subsequently taken up as a term of art by Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and, more recently, Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben. Beckett himself uses the term in a letter to MacGreevy on 20 February 1935; see Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol 1, 1929–1940*, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld et al. (eds.) (Cambridge, 2009), p. lxxxii. (Henceforth *LSBr*.)

² Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 9 October 1933, *LSBr*, pp. 165–170, pp. 166–167.

magazine *Formes* at the time, and would eventually become director of the Irish National Gallery. It was MacGreevy who was Beckett's guide to the rich visual culture of Paris in the later 1920s and early 1930s, from the holdings of the Louvre to the ongoing provocations of the Surrealists.

The regular correspondence between Beckett and MacGreevy carried on throughout the 1930s, and will be an important source for my account of Beckett's deep interest in painting. This interest is particularly apparent in the two-year period he spends in London in 1934 and 1935. Severely shaken by the death of his father, Beckett moves to the city to seek psychotherapy at the Tavistock Clinic in Russell Square. In this period, he attempts to place his writing with publishers, find commissions and earn money by reviewing. However, as it becomes clearer that he will not be able to support himself by writing, a career as curator or critic begins to appear as a realistic alternative. Other options – airplane pilot, advertising copywriter, filmmaker – are sometimes referred to, but on the whole some sort of professional position in the field of art is the most consistently explored.

We know about all of this from a number of key letters, but also from a notebook Beckett kept, now held at Reading University. This has extensive notes from Reginald Wilenski's *An Introduction to Dutch Art*, as well as from some other sources, including Mary Margaret Heaton's biography of Dürer.³ It also lists Dutch and Flemish paintings from the V & A, the Wallace Collection, Kenwood House, Hampton Court and the Dulwich Picture Gallery.⁴ This evident impulse to study art methodically continues into 1936 and 1937, when, aged thirty-one, Beckett embarks on a tour of almost all the great art collections of Germany, keeping a meticulous account of the paintings he saw, and the many artists and critics he sought out and spoke to. These diaries will be a second vitally important source.

Curiously though, in the earlier notebook, compiled while in London, there is no list from the National Gallery. I like to think that this is simply because he knew the collection there so well, that it was such a regular port of call, that he didn't need to remind himself of what it contained. It is a gallery in which I have also spent a great many happy hours over the last thirty years. By way of an introduction to this book on *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts*, I am going to briefly consider a painting that would have certainly featured had Beckett recorded his many visits. In doing so, I will sketch out some of the main themes of this book, ideas that will

³ Wilenski (1929); Heaton (1870).

⁴ Beckett International Foundation, University of Reading (henceforth UoR) MS5001.

return in different forms and combinations as we proceed, reflecting the way that Beckett's thinking about painting, visual art and the image constantly evolved over the course of his life.

It is in Beckett's poem 'Malacoda' that we find the first trace of his visits to the gallery in Trafalgar Square. 'Malacoda' is an elegy for his Father William, who as mentioned earlier, passed away in June 1933. The poem was started soon after the funeral.⁵ It describes the three visits of the undertaker: one to measure the body for the coffin, one to coffin the body, and one to bury it. It is highly allusive, as was Beckett's style at the time: the title is the name of one of the devils that Dante encounters in *Inferno*.⁶ However, the poem also refers to a painting, and relies on a shared knowledge sufficient enough for the reader to imaginatively supply one of the poem's central images:

to cover
to be sure cover cover all over
your targe allow me hold your sulphur
divine dog day glass set fair
stay Scarmilion stay stay
lay this Huysum on the box
mind the imago it is he
hear she must see she must
all aboard all souls
half-mast aye aye

nay

The poem deals with revelation and concealment, with what the narrator sees as the hypocrisies of the ritual surrounding death. It is also concerned for an unnamed 'she', and what she will or will not be permitted to see, and hear, of the process of burial. The reference to Huysum here is an allusion to Jan van Huysum, the noted Dutch painter of floral still lives. Beckett told a scholar in later years that he was thinking of a painting of a butterfly on a flower by this Dutch artist, and such a picture, *Flowers in a Terracotta Vase*, hangs still in the National Gallery.⁷

Van Huysum's painting is a very beautiful one, displaying the vivid colours and meticulously smooth finish for which the painter was and is renowned. This beauty is one of the reasons that Beckett inserts it into the poem. For it figures there as a means of concealing and aestheticizing death: 'Lay this Huysum on the box', the narrator says, i.e. on the coffin.

⁵ Beckett (2012), p.21, p. 293.

⁶ Beckett (2012), p. 294.

⁷ See Harvey (1970), p. 111.



Figure I.1 Jan van Huysum, *Flowers in a Terracotta Vase*,
© National Gallery London

In this way the painting takes its place alongside the other clichéd rituals and metaphors – the flag at half mast, the ship of death – through which the speaker vainly attempts to come to terms with his loss.

At the same time, however, Huysum's picture cannot be reduced to such a simple consolatory function. The painting is in the tradition of the *Vanitas*, as all of Huysum's flower pictures were, and anyone familiar with the Dutch painter would have known this. Some of the flowers seem slightly past their prime, and if one looks closely there is a fly painted on the lip of the urn, a symbol of decay. There is an ambiguity to the picture then; beauty is already tinged with transience, the passage of time. The image cannot quite be said to be concealing or compensating for death because it features

death as a trace. As we shall see, Beckett was intensely interested in the question of how art can both accommodate and arrest temporality, and the way the van Huysum image here acts both to obscure and (implicitly) reveal death is characteristic of the kinds of images he was attracted to.

Immediately after the introduction of Huysum, Beckett refers to the butterflies in the painting by the entomological term 'imago' (the final stage of an insect's metamorphosis). In Vanitas painting of Huysum's style and period butterflies are traditionally seen as representations of life after death, in that during a typical life cycle they become dormant, only to emerge transformed. Beckett is clearly aware of this tradition here. By calling the butterfly an imago, however, he raises other important ideas, ones that were, for him, deeply interconnected. Most obviously, the term 'imago' suggests the faculty of the imagination itself, as well as the image it produces. It is also used in psychology to describe the idealized conception of the parent that the child forms. The allusion to the Huysum painting thus brings together a number of ideas: death and temporality, the notion of beauty and its compensatory power, the image of the Father and the idea of the image itself. This tension between the autonomous, authoritative image and the passage of time towards oblivion is fundamental to Beckett's poetics.

Shortly after his Father's death, Beckett wrote, again to his friend MacGreevy:

My Dear Tom,

Father died last Monday afternoon after an illness lasting just under a week, and was buried the following Wednesday . . . Mother and I nursed him while he was ill . . . He was very beautiful when it was all over.⁸

We can easily relate this to our examination of 'Malacoda'. Reading it, however, I am also reminded of a passage from a later short story, 'First Love', written in the late 1940s. There the narrator is describing, or trying to describe, the face of a prostitute who has accosted him:

[a]s to whether it was beautiful, the face, or had once been beautiful, or could conceivably become beautiful, I confess I could form no opinion. I had seen faces in photographs I might have found beautiful, had I known even vaguely in what beauty was supposed to consist. And my Father's face, on his death bolster, had seemed to hint at some form of aesthetics relevant to man. But the faces of the living, all grimace and flush, can they be described as objects?⁹

⁸ Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 2 July 1933, *LSBr*, pp. 164–165, p. 164.

⁹ 'First Love' in Beckett (1980), pp. 7–30, pp. 22–23.

Once again, as with 'Malacoda' and the letter to MacGreevy, both written shortly after his Father dies, Beckett deploys visual beauty alongside the fact of death. However, 'First Love' adds a further detail which can usefully demonstrate, in a preliminary way, how Beckett develops some of his key aesthetic concerns in terms of the visual image. Beauty is introduced here primarily in terms of visual sensation, but it is an experience that the narrator has little or no knowledge of. Or, more accurately, not enough to make an aesthetic judgement. There is a 'hint' that such an exercise of judgement might become possible at the moment of death, or in a photograph, however. In other words, there is the implication that it is only at the point where the face, in death, achieves the status of object, definitively displaced from human experience, that aesthetic judgement is possible.

This passage was written after Beckett's most intensive encounter with Kantian philosophy, when he had all eleven volumes of the *Werke* shipped to him from Munich in January 1938.¹⁰ The tentative nature of the narrator's relationship with the idea of beauty accords with Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement. A brief and necessarily schematic account of this theory will be useful here, as it is essential to an understanding of the evolution of Beckett's visual poetics.

In cognition, for Kant, the faculty of the imagination synthesizes sense perceptions by applying to them concepts supplied by the faculty of the understanding. Thus, for example, the imagination applies the existing concepts 'square' and 'red' to visual sensations, and we recognize a red square. For Kant, however, beauty is not a concept in the way that red is, and the judgement of the beautiful does not involve the application of a universal by the imagination. This is because beauty derives from a subjective feeling, that of pleasure, rather than from cognition. More precisely, aesthetic pleasure results from what Kant calls the 'freeplay of the faculties' of imagination and understanding.¹¹ That is to say, the beautiful object excites the two faculties to interact in an undetermined fashion, stimulating the action of a pure synthesis without subsuming the sensations generated under a single, familiar concept. One of the attractions of art is that we never arrive at a stable conclusion, but remain in a state of delighted potentiality. In this way, beauty reveals something like the pure workings of the synthesizing faculty of the imagination itself. As such it is not merely a subjective feeling, but a potentially universalizable condition one feels impelled to extend to the whole community. One wants to make

¹⁰ Kant (1921–1923). See Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 5 July 1938, *LSBt*, pp. 579–583, p. 581.

¹¹ Kant (1914), pp. 64–65.

subjective pleasure into objective truth by convincing others of the beauty one sees, though such a task is onerous, and perhaps impossible.

It is significant that one of the few marked extended passages in Beckett's edition of Kant concerns precisely these questions of the beautiful, the beholder and the possibility of universalizable, objective judgement. It comes in the course of Ernst Cassirer's 'Introduction' to the eleven volumes:

[i]t would . . . be ridiculous if anyone who plumed himself on his taste were to think of justifying himself by saying: This object . . . is beautiful for me. For if it merely pleases him, he must not call it beautiful. Many things for him possess charm and agreeableness – no-one cares about that; but when he puts a thing on a pedestal and calls it beautiful, he demands the same delight from others. He judges not merely for himself but for all men, and then speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things.¹²

'First Love's' meditation on the beautiful both conforms to and challenges this Kantian account of aesthetic judgement. Kant's sense of the difficult questions the aesthetic object poses for the beholder, the way the object provokes a testing and retesting of the forms of the understanding, is present in the narrator's concern to categorize what he sees. Yet, for Beckett, such questions also raise issues of temporality, affect, the body and the everyday. In the passage from 'First Love', temporality is present first through the narrator's claim that the prostitute's face might once have been, or might become, beautiful, and second through the highly visual account of the changeability, affects and sensations of the living face at the description's end. When the narrator wonders whether the faces of the living can be described as objects, and so be understood as art, he emphasizes the excess of sensation over concept, and the time-bound nature of the human experience of the world. In this way the narrator's relation to beauty does not conform to the Kantian model, as for the latter art stages the process whereby the understanding organizes sense-experience into intelligible form, albeit without ever concluding it. Contrary to this, Beckett suggests the possibility of a strictly non-Kantian process: the experience of pure sensation without the mediation of the concept. Such a desire reaches back beyond Kant to the earliest aesthetic theories of Baumgarten and the notion of art as *aisthesis* or to the Jena Romanticism that succeeded Kant, Schiller in particular. Beckett's influences are more recent, however, as we shall see.

At the same time, although there is a departure from the transcendental aesthetic and its associated notions of apperception, there also seems to be a latent attraction to a formalism that is ultimately securely Kantian.

¹² Translation taken from Cassirer (1981), p. 317.

The suggestion that the static photograph and the impassive face of the corpse might be the ideal aesthetic objects is in keeping with the mocking, disenchanted tone of the story. And yet, as is so often the case in Beckett's mature work, something serious is afoot alongside the irony. This is particularly evident when the extract is considered in relation to the 1933 letter on the father's death and the many undead, 'petrified' bodies and faces of the later work. The mechanical objectivity of the photograph and the absolute desubjectification of the corpse both, in their different ways, accord to the idea of an autonomous object, subtracted from the everyday, replete and self-communing. In this sense, the passage from 'First Love' reads like a version, or perversion, of a mode of visual aesthetics, heavily indebted to Kant, that will become highly influential in twentieth-century visual culture. The twentieth-century displacement of Kantian formalism from the activity of the 'disinterested' beholding subject to the material art object itself, epitomized by Clement Greenberg's work, but also present in different ways in the aesthetic thought of both Heidegger and Adorno, bears a marked affinity to the 'aesthetics relevant to man' that Beckett sketches in 'First Love'. Having said this, Beckett's rueful, paradoxical association of such a 'human' aesthetics with the corpse brings to this nexus of ideas something that is wholly his own.

The tension between the beautiful, integral image and the passage of time that we saw in 'Malacoda' is thus clearly apparent in 'First Love'. On the one hand we have an identification with the unnerving objectivity of corpse and photograph, and on the other hand the option of a bedding down in the temporal flux of pure subjective sensation. In this way, a Kantian aesthetics that places man at its centre is challenged, ironized and extended in Beckett's work, but never entirely abandoned. Central to his concerns is the question of the ontology of the artwork itself, its status as material object and the consequences of such independent materiality for its efficacy as a register, or producer, of subjective experience. If the artwork is an object, it is dead and cannot capture the sensation of life. And yet if life and sensation themselves are problematized, as Beckett will eventually do, then the static image or the repetitive, stuttering narrative may come to seem the most adequate responses to the world: an aesthetics relevant to man.

For Beckett, painting is thus intimately related to broader philosophical accounts of the image as an interaction of sense impression and conceptual form. In this he is absolutely typical of his time. The issue of how the human experience of light and sound waves is cognitively organized into stable images, how sensation becomes perception, is one of the great

philosophical problems of modernity. In the France of the 1920s and early 1930s it was especially contentious as a central point of disagreement between the two dominant philosophical currents of the time: neo-Kantianism and Bergsonism. In the cultural and critical realm it was in the arena of painting that the debate was played out in its most radical forms. This is most obvious with reference to Cubism, where the neo-Kantian approaches of critics like Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Maurice Reynal responded to, and for a long time obscured, the Bergsonian analyses of Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger.¹³ Indeed it is not too much to say that, right across Europe, painting became a key means of testing philosophical questions of epistemology. That is to say, the question of the correlation between painting and beholder was conceived in terms of the relationship between subject and object, with particular attention paid to the possibility of direct, unmediated access to the object. Beckett's life-long concern with the aesthetics of the subject-object relation must be seen in this context. The paradoxical traces of both Kant and Bergson we can find in his work also have their origins in such art world debates.

Yet Beckett's relationship with such debates must also be placed in a wider, more properly literary context. A sensitivity to the visual image is a tendency that he shares with many modernist writers. Walter Pater, for example, is a figure with an immense influence on modernist literature and one who, in the essays on Leonardo and Giorgione, for example, made important aesthetic advances through the consideration of painting. Pater often described the imagination in terms of intensity of visual perception, and argued that great poetry depends upon 'perfect fidelity to one's own inner presentations, to the precise features of the *picture* within'.¹⁴ In *The Renaissance*, meanwhile, he claimed that art is 'always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of *pure perception*'.¹⁵ We also find the latter phrase prominently in Beckett's 1931 essay *Proust*. It may be that both Beckett and Pater discovered the phrase independently in Schopenhauer, but the coincidence, if such it is, demonstrates at the very least Beckett's early interest in the unmediated visual image, a concept that stretches from Andre Breton's idea of 'the savage eye' right back to modernism's first stirrings. And this is not the only connection we can find with Pater: the pronounced *Giorgionisme* that Beckett shared with Thomas MacGreevy in the 1930s

¹³ For an excellent account see Cottingham (2004).

¹⁴ 'Wordsworth' in (1910), pp. 39–64, p. 51.

¹⁵ 'The School of Giorgione' in Pater (1919), pp. 139–154, p. 138. My italics.

is again typical of a modernist enthusiasm that can be traced to Pater's celebrated essay on the painter.

It is most probably through Joyce that Pater makes an impact on Beckett's early accounts of the image. In 'Dante ... Vico. Bruno .. Joyce', *Work in Progress* is described in terms of 'a sensuous untidy art of intellection', a phrase which is then qualified slightly: 'perhaps "apprehension" is the most satisfactory English word'. Significantly, Beckett goes on to quote Stephen Dedalus's modernist description of the ideal, autonomous image in *Portrait of the Artist*:

the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it. You apprehended it as *one* thing. You see it as one whole. You apprehend its wholeness.¹⁶

Stephen's account is of course highly idiosyncratic, but it is also a product of its time. Although its terms are taken from Aristotle and Aquinas, it owes much to Pater. When the latter argues that in artistic creation 'all depends upon the original unity, the vital wholeness and identity of the initiatory apprehension', he anticipates Joyce's description of 'the instant wherein ... the aesthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness'.¹⁷ But Pater also supplies another important ingredient of pure perception when, in *Appreciations*, he sees 'a sort of thought in sense' as the goal of art. This anticipates the desire of a wide range of modernists for a writing that can mobilize conceptual thought without losing its grasp on the particular. Such a notion of apprehension as a comportment towards the aesthetic object that is immediate, sensuous and yet not limited to somatic response, is strongly present in Eliot, for example, and in particular his well-known 1921 appraisal of the Metaphysical poets and their 'direct sensuous apprehension of thought'.¹⁸ If the Beckett of the Vico essay thinks 'apprehension' is the best word to describe how *Work in Progress* might be grasped, he is thus situating himself in an established tradition.

Echoes of this high modernist interest in apprehension, sensation and the image can still be heard in the crucial year 1937, when Beckett addresses the idea of the poetic image in the context of his friend Denis Devlin's poetry:

¹⁶ Beckett (1961), pp. 5–13, p. 10.

¹⁷ Pater, (1910), pp. 5–38, p. 22. Joyce (1992), p. 231.

¹⁸ Eliot (1993), p. 46.

[a]s for the images, they seem to be not so much uncontrolled as cut adrift from the imaged altogether, doing a kind of Gymkana all on their own. If it was deliberate it wouldn't matter. But the process is obviously one of working up the perceived, when it is not a screen for the failure to perceive, according to the usual mechanism. Because it seems an altogether perceptive, sensuous, instinctive and immediate talent.¹⁹

The criticism of Devlin's images as 'cut adrift' from the imaged names a cardinal modernist sin, one that both Pound and Eliot would have criticized in similar terms. The suggestion is that abstraction and a lack of particularity cause Devlin's images to fail. Once again the reliance on the sensuous as an antidote to such problems reminds us of the Pater, *Portrait*, Eliot lineage.

The modernist concern with the sensuous is a reaction against overly schematic accounts of cognition, where sensibility was too forcefully subsumed under the concept. This continued to concern Beckett through the 1940s, and he often framed the issue in Kantian terms. Thus, for example, in *Watt* we find one of the few direct references to Kant in the published work when Arsene ecstatically evokes the importance of sensuous perception:

I perceived it with a perception so sensuous that in comparison the impressions of a man buried alive in Lisbon on Lisbon's great day seem a frigid and artificial construction of the understanding.²⁰

The reference is to the Lisbon earthquake that Cassirer claims provoked Kant's rejection of a progressive, optimistic teleology.²¹ Beckett had already noted the event in the line 'sur Lisbonne fumante Kant froidement penché' in 'ainsi a-t-on beau', a poem that also summons the face of the dead father, signalling again the remarkable persistence of that image in Beckett's thinking in this area.²² In *Watt*, Arsene's experience is described as even *more* sensuous than the experience of being buried alive. This suggests that the latter is, in itself, also an experience of more than usual sensuousness. One can see the justice of this to some extent. And yet, while being buried alive might accentuate some aspects of sense-experience, it is unlikely to do so in the rich and pleasurable manner associated with the modernist image. Indeed the passage's connotations of darkness, immobilization and suffocation speak equally to the radical *loss* of sense-impression. The association of such an experience with the 'frigid and

¹⁹ Letter to McGreevy, 21 September 1937, *LSBr*, pp. 548–551, p. 549.

²⁰ Beckett (1998), p. 42. ²¹ See Nixon and Hulle (2013), p. 139. ²² Beckett (2012), p. 98.

artificial construction' of Kantian 'understanding' further distances it from Arsene's vivid and rapturous memory. As with the moment of the dead father in 'First Love', this moment in *Watt* thus mobilizes an image-complex that clearly questions the Kantian schema. The suggestion is that any experience of sensuousness and the particular that remains within the Kantian framework can only be one of radical negativity, ruination and death. And yet throughout Beckett's work it is precisely such experiences that are the central talismanic ones, rather than the kind of experience Arsene seems to describe, which is a much more conventionally modernist account of unmediated access to the plenitude of the real. It is at moments like this that we can see a marked departure from Pater, Joyce or Eliot's 'apprehension' and the outlines of a much less sanguine, more properly Beckettian, stance.

Beckett's gradual departure from the high modernist position set out in the Vico essay can be traced in a second way, by attending to another current in modernist thought that runs parallel to the Pater, Eliot, Joyce lineage. This is a more materialist account of the poetic image, one that draws on contemporary science and in particular optics, neurology and experimental psychology. Thus, for example, in 1917 Arthur Symons argues that literature depends upon 'the sensation flashed through the brain, the image on the mental retina'. He goes on to describe this as 'the painter's method, a selection made almost visually: the method of the painter who accumulates detail on detail.'²³ When Ezra Pound later introduces the term *phanopoeia* to describe the poetic use of visual metaphors, he alludes to Symons by defining it as 'the throwing of an image on the mind's retina', again locating the image within the new physiological understanding of cognition.²⁴ T. E. Hulme also drew deeply on contemporary continental philosophy, experimental psychology and art history to ground his poetics in the materiality of the body. Henri Bergson was of course important here. But Hulme was also interested in now lesser-known French figures, such as the psychologist Théodule Ribot and the Nietzschean philosopher Jules de Gaultier. As Wallace Martin has pointed out, Ribot argued that 'immediate impressions or images are closer to reality and therefore more distinct, more reliable than ideas'.²⁵ Here we can see an elevation of the image over the concept that parallels the one that underpins the more philosophical notion of apprehension. Martin goes on to say, rightly, that it was in Ribot's approach that 'early twentieth century

²³ Symons (1917), p. 346.

²⁴ See Pound (2010), p. 52.

²⁵ Martin (1970), pp. 196–204.

writers found a scientific sanction for an aesthetic of the image'.²⁶ What is more, Ribot, like Hulme, associated such mental images primarily with the eye, as is apparent from his use of the term 'plastic' to describe the process that creates them:

[b]y 'plastic imagination' I understand that which has for its special character clearness and precision of form; more explicitly those forms whose materials are clear images (whatever be their nature) . . . giving the impression of reality.²⁷

This use of the term 'plastic' here is derived directly from art criticism. We will return to it several times in this book, as it plays an important role in Beckett's aesthetic thought.

In the early 1930s Beckett, too, read Bergson and Gaultier with close attention, and knew the work of experimental psychologists like Ribot as well as the Gestalt theorists. Indeed this kind of knowledge is often directly incorporated into his writing. Take the following from *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*:

[i]f only we could learn to school ourselves to nurture that divine and fragile Fünklein of curiosity struck from the desire to bind for ever in imperishable relation the object to its representation, the stimulus to the molecular agitations that it sets up, percipi to percipere.²⁸

Here the mental image is seen as a composite formation where subject and object combine in a moment prior to determinate meaning. Beckett's language comes from a number of sources, one of which is readily identifiable through recourse to the 'Dream Notebook', a record of his reading which Beckett kept between 1930 and 1932, and from which many of the allusions in the novel are culled. Towards the end of the notebook we find a series of English paraphrases of passages from de Gaultier's *De Kant à Nietzsche*.²⁹ It is from here that the idea of the image as a molecular disturbance of the brain comes, for example. More important than the source, however, is Beckett's notion of the mental image as an 'imperishable' relation of subject and object, with the object impacting directly and physiologically on the body. Beckett sees such an image not as a conventional sign, but rather in terms of the ideas present in Hulme, Gaultier and Bergson. All three of these thinkers were concerned to

²⁶ Martin (1970), p. 200. ²⁷ Ribot (1906), p. 184.

²⁸ Beckett (1992), p. 160. See also Beckett (1977), p. 138.

²⁹ Gaultier (1900), pp. 28–29; Gaultier (1961), p. 14. See also Beckett's 'Whoroscope Notebook', p. 60v. UoR MS3000.

counter the Cartesian split between subject and object through a notion of the image that was both material and mental. As Bergson famously states on the first page of *Matter and Memory*, the image is ‘more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less than that which the realist calls a thing – an existence placed half-way between the “thing” and the “representation”’.³⁰

Together with this theoretical framework, the early Beckett also shared literary interests with Imagists such as Pound and Hulme. As we shall see in [Chapter 1](#), he wrote an MA dissertation on Jules Romains and the poetic movement known as *Unanisme*. Cyrena Pondrom points out that both Pound and his fellow Imagist F. S. Flint had evangelized for this group.³¹ Thus Pound writes in 1913 that there is not ‘any young man whose work is as refreshing’ as Romains.³² Flint meanwhile had already drawn particular attention to Romains in his lengthy and influential survey of contemporary French poetry in *Poetry Review* in 1912:

M. Romains is a great creator of images . . . Imagine a man who wanders through a large town, brooding over the everchanging spectacle . . . Alternately exalted and depressed, but always rendering his vision and his sensations by words that reproduce exactly what he has seen, except that it has become intensified and serried in passing through his imagination.³³

Flint’s association of Romains with images, spectacle, vision, sensation and intensity situates the poet very precisely in the lineage that we have been establishing here, that of a materialist poetics that values sight, physiology and bodily affect. Some critics have found Beckett’s well-documented regard for *Unanisme* perplexing, in that the latter’s central and often-avowed concern with the production of ‘unanimous’ images aimed at catalysing or recording collective experience seems at odds with his presumed quietism. Yet Romain’s devotion to a materialist theory of the image, evident in his 1920 theoretical work *La Vision extra-rétinienne et le sens paraoptique*, is entirely consonant with Beckett’s demonstrable interest in the relationship between physiology and the poetic image, and with the modernist tradition he inherits from Hulme and others.³⁴

Such influences can still be seen at work in Beckett’s great novel of the city, *Murphy*. Ideas taken from experimental psychology are prominent in the book, Gestalt theory in particular. This account of perception, which posits an immediate ability to grasp fundamental wholes, such as

³⁰ Bergson (1991), p. 9.

³¹ Pondrom (2010), p. 5.

³² Pound (1913).

³³ Flint (1912), p. 383.

³⁴ Written under Romain’s original name, Faragoule (1964).

the face of another, or a flock of birds, before individual features or birds are (or can be) discerned, was modish in the 1930s. Thus Neary, argues for 'the closed figure in the waste without form, and void', and 'the single, brilliant, organized, compact blotch in the tumult of heterogeneous stimulation'.³⁵ One thinks here of Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro', or indeed *Portrait*'s 'selfbounded and selfcontained' aesthetic image. In other words, Gestalt theory provides Beckett with another way of thinking through the modernist aesthetics he inherits. As with the notion of the sensuous apprehension, however, there are significant differences between these modernist ideas and Beckett's deployment of them in his own practice in the 1930s and 1940s. We can track this with some precision by attending to the fortunes of one particular term, closely linked to nineteenth-century experimental psychology. When, in 1954, the German translator of *Molloy* asks him to explain the term coenaesthesia, Beckett cites, in French, from Ribot's translation of Friedrich Henle's 1885 *Maladies de la Personnalité*, and goes on to quote, in German, from the experimental psychologist Wilhelm Wundt, a major influence on Ribot. Yet this is only the final iteration of a more extensive network of references.³⁶

Coenaesthesia first appears in Beckett's *Dream Notebook*, and is subsequently found in *Dream, More Pricks than Kicks* and an important letter to Nuala Costello. According to the quotation from Ribot that Beckett supplies to his translator, the word refers to 'the not yet unravelled chaos of the sensations incessantly transmitted from every point of the body to the sensorium'.³⁷ One meaning of coenaesthesia is thus the fact of undifferentiated sensation itself, the primordial intuition that one is having a sense-experience, prior even to the minimal conceptual organization that allocates sensation to an individual sense-regime. One can see immediately the appeal of such a term for a writer attracted, to some degree at least, to the idea of an embodied poetics, one who values the immediacy of sensation above its conceptualization.

As John Pilling points out, Beckett made a note of the term during his reading of Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, a book which is a major source for the kind of psycho-physiological speculation that animates the various modernist theories of the image. It is in Nordau, for example, that Beckett

³⁵ Murphy (1977), p. 7. ³⁶ See Ackerley (2006), pp. 167–176.

³⁷ Letter to Erich Franzen, 17 February 1954 in Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol II, 1941–1956*, George Craig et al. (eds.) (Cambridge: 2011), pp. 458–460, p. 459 n.2. (Henceforth *LSBr.*).

probably first encountered references to Ribot's *Maladies*, alongside mentions of Janet, Charcot and others. Nordau describes the coenaesthetic relationship to the world as follows, using another term that Beckett noted carefully and stored away. Significantly, Nordau coenaesthesia to account for what he sees as the excesses of modern painting where:

[t]he external world, the 'not-I', either does not exist at all in the consciousness of an emotionally degenerate subject, or it is merely represented there as on a faintly reflecting surface, wholly colourless image, or, as in a concave or convex mirror, by a completely distorted, false image.³⁸

It is worth noting that there are two aspects to this description of the subjectivity of the degenerate modern painter. One disposition turns completely inward, while the other still registers the world, but only in the form of distorted images. It is this skewed vision that Nordau sees as the source of contemporary painting's move away from mimesis. But it is the first aspect that he emphasizes more generally in his book, a hermetic, self-communing inwardness that he associates with narcissism, childishness and disease. Thus he quotes from Binet to the effect that internal 'organic, cardiac, vasomotor, secretory etc phenomena' that are usually unconscious become, for the coenaesthetic degenerate, the main objects of conscious attention.³⁹ Beckett, an inveterate and compulsive auto-diagnostic, with a history of cardiac arrhythmia, seems to have identified with this version of coenaesthesia as a radical withdrawal from the world and immersion in one's own bodily economy. Yet, as we shall see, the second aspect, defined through the production of a distorted image of the world, is essential too.

Beckett's turn to the coenaesthetic, and its subsequent consistent appearance in notes and letters, is another important marker of his turn away from modernist theories of the image. The rhetoric of authenticity and vitality that Hulme and Pound advocated is compromised by Beckett's appropriation of Nordau's term, with its associations of dysfunction, enervation and distortion. Like the modernists, Beckett values a pre-conceptual experience of the image, but more radically than them, he is concerned to suggest such an image's alienating, disturbing, negative qualities. The result is a position that parallels the fraught engagement with Kant noted earlier: the image achieves affective status of a sort but negatively so, it is numbed, deathly and disorientating. Indeed for Beckett the truth-potential of the art image lies in such petrification, an undead

³⁸ Nordau (1998), p. 257.

³⁹ Nordau (1998), p. 256.

autonomy that speaks of the isolation of all things, rather than in positive terms such as sensuousness, vitality or becoming.

Beckett's disengagement from modernist notions of the image, whether it is Eliot's attempt to find images that counteract the dissociation of sensibility, or Hulme's Bergsonian search for the concrete, should be seen as a part of a broader tendency in the 1930s. Several of the terms discussed so far can be found in the work of his contemporaries in Paris. One such figure is the poet and film-maker Jean Epstein, who also seized on the notion of coenaesthesia in his 1921 book *La Poésie d'Aujourd'hui: un nouvel état d'intelligence*.⁴⁰ For Epstein the term described what he called 'the physiological face of the subconscious'.⁴¹ Importantly, Epstein understood the experience as conditional on fatigue and exhaustion, drawing on Ribot and the psychologists Charles Féré and Angelo Mosso to do so.⁴² Unlike Nordau, however, Epstein understands coenaesthesia as an entirely positive phenomenon, allowing access to subconscious, organic rhythms and images that can act as balm and compensation for the debilitating intensity and artifice of modernity. Equally importantly, when he argues that poetry and cinema can and should simulate such experiences through the manipulation of images, Epstein clearly relies on the assumption that the coenaesthetic experience is primarily visual.

Beckett too associates coenaesthesia with exhaustion and the visual, but he does not instrumentalize it as therapy in the way that Epstein does. Where Epstein remains within a modernist paradigm, so that the suspension of conventional perceptual frameworks is allied to a metaphysics of authenticity and a promise of redemption, Beckett refuses such commitments. This can be illustrated through an analysis of a poem like 'Rue de Vaugirard', written in 1938–1939. Here it is translated in its entirety:

Halfway up
I disengage and beaming with candour
expose the plate to light and shadow
resuming fortified
by an incontestable negative.⁴³

Rue de Vaugirard is one of the longest and steepest streets in Paris, and the poem describes a moment of physical exhaustion that enables the production of a truth. A familiar modernist trope of the visual image being imprinted directly on the physiology is present in the poem through its

⁴⁰ Epstein (1921).

⁴¹ Epstein (1921), p. 83.

⁴² See Rabinbach (1990).

⁴³ Beckett (2012), p. 100. My translation.

comparison of the speaker's vulnerable body to a photographic plate.⁴⁴ Importantly, however, there is no sense of this as an authentically sensuous experience. Indeed the way that the poem connects the speaker's body with both a car (through the verb 'debrayer', i.e. declutching) and a camera, emphasizes an automatism that precludes the connotations of a deep subjectivity upon which the standard modernist valorization of the senses relies. It is in fact through the experience of the radical negation of the self, an encounter with its failure or absolute limit, that the central image of the poem achieves its 'incontestable' status. As with Epstein, fatigue facilitates imagistic intensity, though there is a formal, astringent and alienating quality to the idea of a photographic negative that is at odds with Epstein's much more optimistic approach.

We know that Beckett was acquainted with Epstein's films: in 1934 he favourably compares *Finis Terrae*, Epstein's 1929 documentary about the Brittany coast, with Flaherty's *Man of Aran*.⁴⁵ He could also have encountered him in the pages of *transition*, however, where Eisenstein admired Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Ussher* in June 1930.⁴⁶ As is well-known, this journal was a crucial testing ground for Beckett's literary aspirations in the very early years of his career. It is also however a vital resource in tracking the commerce between the visual and other arts in the period. In the pages of *transition* painting, cinema and photography were regularly appealed to as models for artistic practice. This is evident above all in the regular use of the term 'plastic' to describe the ideal work of art. Hence for example, in November 1929, the magazine's founder and editor Eugene Jolas dismisses surrealist montage, and lauds Charles Sheeler's 'plastic objectivity', arguing that 'his camera gives us the finest imaginative possibilities through light and dark arrangements which approach the abstract and crystal purity of poetry'.⁴⁷ In the same issue, Stuart Gilbert's essay 'The Function of Words' argues that in what he and Jolas called 'the revolution of the word':

words are treated as plastic media; their forms and colours may be blended according to the instinctive treatment of the artist, and insofar as he has apprehended and can express the racial affective values of the signs he employs, he will enable the readers of his work to share his emotion.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ This association between sickness or exhaustion and the camera has its own history: '[s]ickness makes a man sensitive like a photographic plate' write Jules and Edmond de Goncourt in their *Journal*. Quoted in Baldick (1960), p. 9.

⁴⁵ Letter to Nuala Costello, 10 May 1934, *LSBI*, pp. 207–211, p. 207.

⁴⁶ Eisenstein (1930), pp. 90–104, p. 102.

⁴⁷ Eugene Jolas, *transition*, 18 November 1929, p. 123.

⁴⁸ Gilbert (1929), pp. 203–206.

Finally, in 'The Novel Is Dead, Long Live the Novel', a manifesto signed by Jolas, Gilbert and others, we have a clear summary of the modernist goal of direct intimacy between self and world, with the plastic as catalyst: '[t]he novel of the future will be a plastic encyclopedia of the fusion of subjective and objective reality.'⁴⁹

Beckett, too, employed the 'plastic' as a term of aesthetic approbation, but as we shall see, for him it does not describe such a fusion, quite the opposite. The *transition* aesthetic might be present in *Dream*, when Belacqua cherishes the 'scraps of German' that play in his mind as 'grand, old, plastic words', emphasizing the material quality of the unfamiliar language.⁵⁰ But ten years later, as Beckett is writing *Watt*, the term appears again with a very different valency. As we saw earlier, in the novel Arsene's story exemplifies a mode of sensuous experience that can be associated with Pater and Joyce's *Portrait*. Where Arsene describes a kind of richness of perception typical of the Modernist ideal of authentic, unalienated experience, however, Watt himself undergoes a contact with the real that, though similarly immediate, explicitly thematizes the alternative notion of the image that Beckett is slowly evolving. It is here that the term 'plastic' comes in. Watt is attempting to describe his memory of the visit of the Galls to Mr Knott's house:

it was not ended when it was past, but continued to unfold, in Watt's head, from beginning to end, over and over again, the complex connection of its lights and shadows, the passing from silence to sounds and from sound to silence, the stillness before the movement and the stillness after, the quickening and retarding, the approaches and the separations, all the shifting detail of its march and ordinance, according to the irrevocable caprice of its taking place. It resembled them in the vigour with which it developed a purely plastic content, and gradually lost, in the nice processes of its light, its sound, its impacts and its rhythm, all meaning, even the most literal.⁵¹

This is the first of the scenes 'of great formal brilliance and indeterminate purport' that will haunt Watt during the remainder of his stay in Mr Knott's house. Once again, what should be noted is the way in which conventional perception is not replaced by authentic sensuous experience. As with 'Rue de Vaugirard', 'formal brilliance' suggests something rather more austere and reserved than the erotics of the image implied in Eliot, or the hortatory immediacy of Hulme and Pound. Similarly, the 'indeterminate purport' of Watt's images is rather more equivocal than the modernist norm.

⁴⁹ Gilbert (1929), p. 239.

⁵⁰ Beckett (1992), p. 191.

⁵¹ Beckett (1998), p. 69.

What we are left with is what the narrator calls a 'purely plastic content'. As mentioned earlier, with reference to Ribot and his literary followers, plastic is a term that migrated from the visual arts into experimental psychology and from there into literary discourse. In its conventional, art-critical use, it is associated in particular with the preeminent art critic of the inter-war period in Britain and France, Roger Fry, to whom we will be returning. Beckett's resort to the term in *Watt* thus draws attention both to the profoundly visual nature of his poetics of the image and to the antecedents of that heritage in pre-war modernism. But what I want to emphasize here is the way that, in the passage from *Watt*, the plastic does not refer to that fusion of subject and object that, in various ways, attracted Pater, Pound, Eliot, Romaine, Epstein and the *transition* circle. Rather than that, the description of the memory emphasizes the negativity and loss that is becoming more and more central to Beckett. Watt watches his own memories unfold from the outside, as a kind of abstract film composed of lights and shadows, stillness and movement, one that retains the shapes and rhythms of the real but drains them of significance. As with the face of the dead father, this is an image that is intensely realistic but also unreal; affective but only negatively, through the loss of sense; autonomous and self-contained, but at the price of distance and impenetrability. 'All meaning, even the most literal' is lost and what takes its place is a kind of abstraction that is modelled on the forms of experience that Beckett understood as coenaesthetic: a grasp of the world at its degree zero, the impossible image of a purely asymbolic looking.

Such ideas also appear in the most celebrated statement of Beckett's aesthetics, *Three Dialogues*, the critical collaboration with Georges Duthuit that was published in 1949. Here again an approach to the image related to experimental psychology is suggested from the outset. The dialogue begins with B. responding to D.'s Bergsonian description of Tal Coat's painting as a flux of movements. B. immediately counters by describing the work as

a thrusting towards a more adequate expression of natural experience, as revealed to the vigilant coenaesthesia. Whether achieved through submission or through mastery, the result is a gain in nature.⁵²

He continues: 'by nature I mean here, like the naivest realist, a composite of perceiver and perceived, not a datum, an experience'. Beckett's description here, in response to Tal Coat's painting, is close to the position that he had adopted in the early to mid-1930s. When he refers to 'a composite of

⁵² Beckett (1965), p. 101.

perceiver and perceived' he is translating 'percipi to percipere', the phrase by de Gaultier that he uses in both *Dream* and *Murphy*, a locution that signals that suturing of subject and object by the image prized by modernism. Likewise, B.'s description of this painting as the product of a 'vigilant coenaesthesia' confirms the importance of this term and its connection with visual art. The description understands Tal Coat's abstraction as a registration of unmediated 'natural experience' in the modernist sense: the 'gain in nature' that Beckett sees there, is its more accurate representation of the concrete and the particular unmediated by conceptual filters. Vitally, however, B. also has reservations about the work, and they are recorded in terms like 'vigilant', 'thrusting', 'submission' and 'mastery' which suggest the kind of heroic, active, positive modernist inflections which, as we have seen, Beckett disagreed with (both voluntary submission and mastery being I suggest active dispositions). Instead, again following the trajectory already traced, in *Three Dialogues* B. advocates 'an insuperable indigence', a condition of profound 'weariness' and 'disgust' that attends and paradoxically enables the artistic act. This paradox of strength in weakness recalls the exhaustion of 'Rue de Vaugirard' and the perplexity of Watt in the face of his memory of the Galls. The description of Tal Coat's painting as an existential or phenomenological 'experience', rather than a scientific 'datum', also registers Beckett's vision of an inhuman, non-subjective registration of the real. It is thus no surprise that *Three Dialogues* eventually resorts to the language of 'formal brilliance and indeterminable purport', when it ecstatically describes Bram van Velde's painting as 'this coloured plane, that was not there before. I don't know what it is, having ever seen anything like it before. It seems to have nothing to do with art, in any case, if my memories are correct.'⁵³

These closing lines of *Three Dialogues* echo the narrator's bewilderment in front of the prostitute's face in 'First Love' ('As to whether it was beautiful, the face ...') and so copperfasten the former's position as another moment in the evolution of Beckett's poetics rather than the singular definitive statement it is often taken for. That the reduction of painting to 'a coloured plane' is not a simple appeal to geometrical abstraction is clear from B.'s dismissal of Mondrian or Kandinsky earlier in the dialogue. Rather, this text draws on Beckett's long-standing interest in the experience of the precognitive image, of witnessing without concept, of the transcription of pure sensation to describe its ideal image. But the closing lines of *Three Dialogues*, quoted at the beginning of this paragraph,

⁵³ Beckett (1965), p. 126.

also make clear Beckett's departure from the modernist position, in that this unprecedented encounter between painting and beholder is the direct (if paradoxical) result of what B. had described earlier as the 'incoercible *absence* of relation' between subject and object.⁵⁴ Once again, modernist ideals of immanence and authenticity are directly controverted. Indeed B. ends by saying that it is his 'inability' to make van Velde's 'fidelity' to impoverishment and absence 'a new occasion, a new term of relation' that 'places [him] . . . in what I think is still called an unenviable situation, familiar to psychiatrists.'⁵⁵ Here, as with the engagement with Kant, the power of the image is predicated on its negativity, its truth associated not with sensuous thought or vitality but with failure, exhaustion, impossibility. The introduction of psychiatry at this point, immediately before B.'s reference to the painting as decontextualized 'coloured plane', also seals the provenance of this comment in experimental theories of vision, and situates *Three Dialogues* firmly within the narrative of Beckett's thinking that this introduction has described.

The intellectual arc briefly outlined here forms one central argument of this book, supporting a contention that Beckett's is above all a visual poetics. We will attend to Beckett's deep interest in painting in the light of this trajectory, demonstrating how it informs the way he looks at and writes about painting during several key periods in his career, and how this conditions the deployment of real and invented pictures in his work. The chapters that follow will also substantially complicate the basic narrative of Beckett's aesthetic of the image that I have here rehearsed, however. I will highlight reversals and contradictions in that narrative, and demonstrate the way that Beckett's thought was highly sensitive to a range of historical and political contexts.

The dialogue between Beckett's aesthetic thought and his times is evident most of all in his evident suspicion or wariness of certain kinds of image. This is particularly clear in his frequent allusions to religious painting. There is a marked tendency in his diaries, letters, poems and novels to see such images as potentially coercive artefacts, and to find alternative ways of reading them as sensuous, materially vivid forms that suspend or dislocate meaning, pushing the image towards a terrain that Beckett described as 'abstraction'. In this way the philosophical and physiological accounts of the visual image outlined in this Introduction exist in tandem with a highly nuanced awareness of the ideological power of the image. This was one of the great surprises of my research, though

⁵⁴ Beckett (1965), p. 125. My italics.

⁵⁵ Beckett (1965), p. 126.

perhaps it should not have come as such a revelation, for as the historical-contextual aspect of this book will show, Beckett's vigilance concerning the image is a result of the formations of his aesthetic in the specific historical and political contexts of the 1930s and 1940s. This was a period in which art criticism was routinely mobilized in overtly ideological ways. During the so-called *rapelle à l'ordre*, for example, when artists right across Europe turned away from abstraction, the newly important themes of the human figure, neo-Classicism and the landscape were seized upon by critics on both left and right. As we shall see, Beckett, too, appropriates these three elements in his writing, but does so for his own purposes (a parallel with Picasso will be drawn here). Similarly, the rise of art history as a discipline in the first half of the century was intimately linked to ferocious debates over national and European identity, debates that often polarized around the binaries of Germany and France, North and South, Protestant and Catholic. I will show how the treatment of medieval and Renaissance painting in Beckett's German diaries are informed by these debates, for example. Drawing on this rich and diverse background, *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts* will demonstrate the way that, although Beckett's aesthetic of the image has a certain consistency across time, it is also always in a nuanced dialogue with the history of the twentieth-century and as a consequence always in process.

Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts is the first book to comprehensively examine Beckett's aesthetic and more broadly philosophical engagement with the visual arts with special attention to the cultural and historical contexts of that engagement. The extent and depth of Beckett's interest in art has been known since the publication of James Knowlson's *Damned to Fame* in 1996, but there has been no attempt to determine how his taste and knowledge was conditioned by broader discursive factors, some of which I have briefly indicated in the course of this Introduction. This approach is one of the major departures that this book makes from previous treatments of Beckett's engagement with visual art, which often read Beckett's references to painting solely in terms of the light they throw on his oeuvre as a whole, or as enquiries into philosophical aesthetics in general. One corollary of this is that Beckett's writings and comments on art have usually been treated as analogous to his creative work, i.e. seen as examples of a profoundly distinctive imagination, instead of interventions in art-critical debates with their own histories and governing assumptions. A second is that Beckett's comments on art at different periods are conflated into one permanent stance when, as I will show, he draws on disparate, sometimes contradictory, sources at different times. Given the

historical turn in Beckett Studies, the increased availability of archival material and recent developments in the art history of the twentieth century (particularly in the study of the crucial decade of the 1930s) the time is ripe for a more rigorously cultural-historical approach to this central part of Beckett's intellectual life.

This is not to say that the significance of Beckett's knowledge of and response to the visual arts for his own work will be neglected. On the contrary, it will be my contention that once Beckett's views are historicized their import for his writing and aesthetics is revealed in even starker, and often more surprising, terms. Hence each chapter, while setting out the intellectual and cultural contexts for Beckett's reference to art and its discourses will also include the examination of specific texts, including: *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, *Echo's Bones*, *Murphy*, *Watt*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, *Not I*, *Endgame*, *All Strange Away*, *Imagine Dead* *Imagine* and *Ohio Impromptu*.

There are two major predecessors for any contemporary treatment of Beckett and art: first, James Knowlson's ground-breaking chapter-length survey in *Images of Beckett*, second Lois Oppenheim's monograph *The Painted Word*.⁵⁶ Knowlson's essay spans Beckett's entire career, but does not examine the art-critical or art-historical contexts. Oppenheim's book is an immensely subtle, persuasive consideration of the area, but focused on the philosophical implications of Beckett's interests. My book will complement it through a more historical focus. Mention should also be made here of David Lloyd's *Beckett's Thing: Painting and Theatre* which appeared too late to be considered here. Three previously published chapters on Jack B. Yeats, Bram van Velde and Avigdor Arikha suggest that, while there are some points of contact between the present book and Lloyd's, the strongly archival aspect of *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts* together with its coverage of a very wide range of painters (rather than the three considered by *Beckett's Thing*) and its examination of prose and poetry as well as the plays render the two books very distinct.⁵⁷

There have also been many valuable analyses of individual periods, texts or artists since Oppenheim's book. A special issue of *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* on *Three Dialogues* appeared in 2003, as did Daniel Albright's chapter on Surrealism in *Beckett and Aesthetics*.⁵⁸ The National Gallery of Ireland published a catalogue for their exhibition *Samuel Beckett: A Passion for Painting* in 2006.⁵⁹ Knowlson's articles on the Kassel connection in

⁵⁶ Knowlson (2000).

⁵⁷ Lloyd (2005), pp. 42–66; (2011), pp. 269–295; (2014), pp. 25–44; (2016).

⁵⁸ Albright (2003).

⁵⁹ Croke (2006).

2005 and on Dutch Art in 2011 were again ground-breaking; Uhlmann considered Beckett's 'aesthetic writings' and the image in 2006; Derval Tubridy considered Beckett's influence on contemporary art in 2007 and 2010, and in 2009 Peter Boxall wrote on Bosch.⁶⁰ Most recently, there was Mark Nixon's chapter on the visual arts in the *German Diaries* (2011) and David Houston Jones' *Beckett and Testimony* (2011), which devotes a chapter to religious art.⁶¹ David Hatch's 'Beckett in Transition: "Three Dialogues", Little Magazines, and Post-War Parisian Aesthetic Debate', Kevin Brazil's 'Beckett, Painting and the Question of the Human' and especially Jean-Michel Rabaté's 'Beckett's Masson: From Abstraction to Non-Relation' give excellent summaries of some of the intellectual contexts for 'Three Dialogues'.⁶² Finally, there are also important German-language accounts of Beckett in Germany by Giesling and Veit.⁶³

Of all these publications on Beckett and the visual arts, only the Knowlson essays, the Nixon chapter and the German language essays are archival and historical in approach, and even they do not attend to the art-historical and art-critical background in the manner I am suggesting. The rest of the essays mentioned provide an indication of the importance of the theme, the wealth of information available and the increasing amount of attention Beckett's interest in art has received over the last fifteen years. Yet the scattered nature of this attention also demonstrates the need for a single monograph. This book will provide that, across seven roughly chronological chapters taking the reader from Beckett's earliest writings in Dublin and Paris to the theatre and prose of the 1970s.

⁶⁰ See Knowlson (2005), pp. 64–94; (2009). Uhlmann (2006); Tubridy (2007), pp. 5–11; (2010), pp. 143–159; Boxall (2009).

⁶¹ Nixon (2011a); Houston Jones (2011).

⁶² Hatch (2005), pp. 43–56; Brazil (2013), pp. 81–99; Rabaté (2014), pp. 131–145.

⁶³ Veit (2006), pp. 27–80; Giesling (2007).

CHAPTER I

A Poetics of the Image *Paris and Dublin 1929–1932*

Of all Beckett's plays, prose and poems it is his early novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* that draws most overtly on his knowledge of the visual arts. *Dream* was written in Paris and Dublin between mid-1931 and June 1932, and is unmistakably apprentice work.¹ More accurately, it is the work of an apprentice to James Joyce, evident in its omnivorous appetite for facts and snippets, allusions and often unattributed quotations. In the course of the book reference is made to Apelles, Leonardo, Botticelli, Cellini, Michelangelo, El Greco, Rubens, Cézanne, Braque and Picasso, with slightly more extended excursions on individual paintings by Rembrandt and Franciabigio. Finally there is a sustained and intricate ekphrastic account of Ewald Dülberg's painting *Abendmahl*.

Yet *Dream* is the centre of a much broader series of writings, letters and notes, some published and some not, which surround and overlap with it and with each other. Chief amongst these is the essay on *Proust*, published in 1931 but written very rapidly in the summer of 1930, when Beckett was still a *lecteur* at the École Normale Supérieure.² Here again visual culture plays an important role, from Giotto, Leonardo and Mantegna to contemporary advertising and photography. There are also the substantial lecture notes taken by four of Beckett's students at Trinity College Dublin in 1930 and 1931, where Beckett often has recourse to painting in order to illustrate his somewhat unorthodox ideas on contemporary literature.³ We can add to these several poems, many letters and the *Dream* notebook, on which Beckett drew for his novel.⁴ Taken together this body of material provides a rich resource for the reconstruction of Beckett's aesthetic thinking in the period between 1929 and 1932. As we shall see, it throws particular light on his attitudes towards the nature of the literary image.

¹ With these dates I follow Pilling (1999), pp. x–xiv.

² Pilling (1999), p. vii.

³ TCD MIC60.

⁴ See Pilling (1999).

In what follows I will argue that the visual, particularly painting and debates on visual perception, is central to these attitudes.

John Pilling was the first to note the curious and persistent manner in which the word ‘statement’ recurs, in both the creative and critical work, as Beckett attempts to work out a poetics.⁵ What will be most important for my argument in this book, however, is that Beckett’s choice of the word suggests that he sees the artwork as a truth-claim. A statement, after all, is a proposition that can be true or false. To understand an artwork as a statement, I suggest, is to endow the artwork itself, text or painting, with value, rather than locating value exclusively in the free-play of the faculties, in the Kantian sense. Such a displacement of the subject by the art object, the migration of value from the beholder’s experience to the material thing, is repeated across twentieth-century aesthetics, in both Heidegger and Adorno, for example. And yet having said that, Beckett is ambivalent, especially in the early 1930s, and the aesthetic experience of the reader or viewer is also often evoked. Consider the following, one of *Dream*’s most familiar passages: ‘the experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement, between the flowers that cannot co-exist’.⁶ Although the description explicitly turns on questions of silence and sound, no sooner has Beckett summoned the world of music than he turns to the visual. The reference to the ‘flowers that cannot co-exist’ refers to the manner in which sixteenth-century Dutch flower painters, such as van Huysum (who, as we have seen, is mentioned in ‘Malacoda’), often depicted blooms from different seasons in a single impossible bouquet. Here the artifice of even the most realist painting, the ruses whereby it captures and stills the flow of temporality in the single material ‘statement’ of a canvas, speaks more directly to Beckett’s concerns than the musical metaphor of the rest of the sentence. It is this association of the statement with the art surface, the materiality of painting and the question of temporality that I want to pursue. But at the same time we must not lose sight of what Beckett calls here ‘the experience of the reader’ or beholder.

The very first declaration of Beckett’s aesthetic of the statement occurs in his earliest critical writing, the essay ‘Dante...Vico. Bruno..Joyce’, published in *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*. Here Beckett, referring to what would become *Finnegans Wake*, writes that ‘we are presented with a statement of the particular’ and, as we shall see, explicitly associates such a statement with painting.

⁵ Pilling (2004), pp. 46 and 200. See also Nixon (2011a), p. 179.

⁶ Beckett (1992), p. 137.

That Joyce's 'system of Poetics' attends to the particular rather than the universal is a central contention of the essay on 'Work in Progress', and Beckett's account of Vico's thought clearly sees the latter as authorizing the Joycean procedure. For our purposes it is important that Beckett's earliest programmatic aesthetic examines a figure who anticipates some of the key concerns of twentieth-century visual aesthetics, in particular the notion of art's relation to non-conceptual understanding, and the problem of the empathic relation between painting and beholder.⁷ Both issues are fundamental to Beckett.

In Beckett's brief summary, Vico's account of the historical development of poetry depicts 'primitive' peoples as incapable of conceptual thinking or 'of receiving anything more abstract than the plain record of objectivity'.⁸ As a result, their poetry, language and myths are characterized by aversion to abstraction and investment in the immediate. Their poetry 'is all passion and feeling', attending to sensation rather than the concept, while their language is limited to the strongly visual codes of gesture and hieroglyphics which, in their identity of form and content, are an example of what Beckett calls 'direct expression'. Finally, primitive myth is not allegorical but 'a statement of fact' for 'the actual creators of these myths gave full credence to their face-value. Jove was no symbol: he was terribly real'.⁹ Principles of bodily and affective immediacy, and a lack of mediation by transcendental or symbolic frameworks, thus connect 'primitive' poetry, language, myth and art. Beckett's reading of Vico, in other words, remains within the familiar modernist framework of pure perception. And this is how Beckett sees 'Work in Progress' too, for when he turns to Joyce's text proper he deploys the same terminology he used to describe primitive poetry: 'Here is direct expression – pages and pages of it'.¹⁰

Direct expression is Beckett's phrase (purloined, as Pilling points out, from his tutor Thomas Rudmose-Brown's 'Introduction' to his *Anthology of French Literature*) for language that impacts directly on the reader, drawing on passion and affect rather than being filtered through the intellect.¹¹ Hence his essay's celebrated description of Joyce's language as an object in the world, with the same potentialities and forms of agency as such objects, rather than a system of reference to them. As with primitive language, the content of *Work in Progress* is organic to its form, with the latter conceived dynamically, in terms of physical action and sensation: 'when the sense is sleep the words go to sleep ... When the sense is dancing the words

⁷ See Barasch (1990), pp. 7–16.

⁸ Beckett (1961), p. 9.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pilling (2006), p. 18.

dance'.¹² Beckett glosses this description with a series of examples of such affective, bodily writing: Shakespeare's 'greasy words that express corruption', or 'the ooze squelching' in Dickens' descriptions of the Thames.¹³

This then is what Beckett admiringly calls, using Eliot's terminology, a 'sensuous untidy art of intellection'. He then continues:

[t]his writing that you find so obscure is a quintessential extraction of language and painting and gesture, with all the inevitable clarity of the old inarticulation. Here is the savage economy of hieroglyphics. Here words are not the polite contortions of 20th century printer's ink. They are alive. They elbow their way on to the page, and glow and blaze and fade and disappear.¹⁴

I draw attention to this description for two reasons. First, alongside language and gesture, already mentioned as primordial in the summary of Vico, we have a new and significant aesthetic model: painting. The significance of the visual for direct expression is then reinforced by reference to 'the savage economy of hieroglyphics'. That this savagery is subsequently opposed, in the passage quoted, to the polite conventions of printer's ink, suggests Beckett's strong sense of Joyce's page as a living, material surface of inscription, where words are charged with visual intensity: glowing, blazing, fading. All of this contributes to what Beckett calls, in an important phrase, Joyce's 'statement of the particular'.¹⁵

From this essay to the letter to Axel Kaun of July 1937 and beyond, Beckett's comments on aesthetics often see writing in terms of a surface, a fabric which bears an image: a sheet or a veil or curtain. That is to say, the text or image is identified with its material support: page, canvas, brain, body. Very often this identification is also associated with the idea of the statement. An early example, which Pilling dates to August 1931, is the poem 'Alba', in particular the second stanza:

whose beauty shall be a sheet before me
a statement of itself drawn across the tempest of emblems
so that there is no sun and no unveiling
and no host
only I and then the sheet
and bulk dead.¹⁶

Beckett also uses elements of this description in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, and the two passages, when taken together, throw considerable

¹² Beckett (1961), p. 10.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Beckett (1961), p. 11.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Beckett (2012), p. 10.

light on each other. The occasion in the novel is one of those sudden, longed-for subtractions from the phenomenal world that are experienced by the main character, Belacqua, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes not. Beckett describes this curious mental state in a prose that owes a great deal to the sacerdotal, Paterian cadences of the aesthetic epiphanies in *Portrait*, and the passage also partakes of Stephen's prized sense of the 'self-bounded and self-contained' nature of the 'aesthetic image':

[p]lane of white music, warpleless music expunging the tempest of emblems, calm womb of dawn whelping no sun . . . still flat white music, alb of timeless light. It is a blade before me, it is a sail of bleached silk on a shore, impassive statement of itself drawn across the strata and symbols, lamina of peace for my eyes and my brain slave of my eyes . . . the mysteries of bulk banished and the mind swathed in the music and candour of the dawn-foil, facts of surface. The layers of Damask fused and drawn to the uppermost layer, silken blade. Blind and my mind blade of silk, blind and music and whiteness facts in the fact of my mind.¹⁷

Although this is an account of some form of vision, the prose description relies even more overtly than the poem on images of material support of various kinds. The plane, parapet, alb, sail, lamina and fused 'layers of Damask' are all 'facts of surface', as the passage puts it. Although the repeated references to whiteness, blindness and bleaching suggest erasure, there is a simultaneous emphasis on the persistence of a material presence. If, as the poem puts it, 'bulk' is 'dead', surface is not, and it is the insistence of the latter that seems to supply the 'facts' that inhere in 'the fact of my mind' with which the quotation ends. As with the essay on 'Work in Progress', both the prose passage and 'Alba' understand the image primarily as an entity, a fact or object with physical properties and agency that corresponds to, and partakes of, the existence of facts in the world. Indeed there is a strong suggestion that the image is a kind of tympanum or communicating membrane where world and self are contiguous. Belacqua summons an autonomous, white surface, where a complete communion of mind and world takes place beyond mere 'emblems'. The reference to 'my brain slave of my eyes' situates all of this within the discourse of experimental psychology as set out in the Introduction, as does the general conception of the image as a coincidence of the facts of the world and the facts of mind. And yet all this is in tension with the idealist, visionary, formalist quality that is also undeniably present.

¹⁷ Beckett (1992), pp. 181–182.

Dream contains a further iteration of the image as interface in explicitly physiological language, one that we considered briefly in the Introduction

if only we could learn to school ourselves to nurture that divine and fragile Fünkelein of curiosity struck from the desire to bind for ever in imperishable relation the object to its representation, the stimulus to the molecular agitations that it sets up, percipi to percipere.¹⁸

There is a trace of the Vico essay here, where Beckett had reported that, according to Vico ‘poetry . . . was born of *curiosity*, daughter of ignorance. The first men had to create matter by the force of their imagination’.¹⁹ The exorbitance of this statement should be noted: although Beckett is ostensibly describing Vico’s historical poetics, this is the earliest iteration of a tendency to idealism that never goes away. Hence moments like the passage above in *Dream* still entertain a sense of the prelapsarian immediacy that Beckett saw mobilized in ‘Work in Progress’. And yet now another language has intervened, so that despite the reference to Meister Eckhart’s divine spark (Fünkelein), the general tenor is materialist and positivist. This too will be an abiding recourse. As noted in the Introduction, such an idea of perception as a physiological, ‘molecular’ disturbance echoes Jules de Gaultier’s *De Kant à Nietzsche* and his core question: ‘what degree of resemblance is there between the molecular movement produced in the brain and the appearance of an object in space?’²⁰ Once again then, as with the vision of the Alba, there is a tension between the ideal and the material.

An influence on Hulme and Eliot, de Gaultier was a conservative, anti-academic philosopher who saw himself in the tradition of Spinoza, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Beckett’s interest thus hints at his investment in this line of thought. Gaultier reworked Nietzsche’s Will-to-Power as the Will-to-Illusion, a powerful urge to ameliorate what he saw as the tragic-comic human condition through the manufacture of consoling fictions. This can happen at the personal level, as in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (prompting Gaultier’s term ‘Bovarysme’), or more grandly, as in the case of Kant’s philosophy, which, Gaultier claims in characteristically acerbic form, was ‘the most unfortunate mental monstrosity ever produced by the imagination’.²¹ The nature of this monstrosity was, for Gaultier as for Nietzsche, the transcendental aspects of Kant’s thought. This might well account for Beckett’s attraction to Gaultier in the early 1930s, for the

¹⁸ Beckett (1992), p. 160. ¹⁹ Beckett (1961), p. 8. My italics.

²⁰ Gaultier (1900), pp. 28–29; Gaultier (1961), p. 14. ²¹ *Ibid.*

French philosopher's ideas lie firmly within the modernist paradigm that stresses the sensuous and the particular as opposed to the conceptual.

Beckett's account of perception in *Proust* seems to owe something to Gaultier's critical account of Kant, as well as Schopenhauer's reworking of the latter. Throughout the essay, Beckett is scathing about the ways in which conceptual thought works to conceal the real, the latter explicitly conceived in aesthetic terms as 'beauty' and 'enchantment'. Thus Beckett approves 'when the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and only then may it be a source of enchantment.'²² This, and particularly the notion of isolation, is clearly coming from Schopenhauer, who argues for an aesthetic that rests on 'secure contemplation of the presented object removed from all context'.²³ In more explicitly Kantian language, for Beckett such an object 'resists the propositions of [the] team of syntheses' or, again alluding to Kant, stimulates 'the free play of every faculty'.²⁴ This combination of Kant and Schopenhauer is also reflected in a repeated reference to 'disinterest' as the core quality of the aesthetic object.²⁵

Although disinterestedness is a Kantian term, Beckett's commitment to objectivity and impassivity derives above all from Schopenhauer, who he had started reading in July 1930. Yet Gaultier's strongly physiological, Nietzschean ideas are also present, generating an ambiguity that is also very much present in Schopenhauer himself.²⁶ It is true that, drawing on Locke, Schopenhauer held out the possibility of a non-Kantian, intuitive perception between subject and object. It is also true that he relied heavily on physiology, early brain science and optics in his account of the senses. Yet there is, in Schopenhauer, an obscurity about the intuitive perception he opposes to Kantian concepts. On the one hand it is not simply a question of the body's physiological registration of sense data. As he put it: 'the objective world . . . cannot just step into our head from without, already cut and dried, through the senses'.²⁷ Rather it needs the aid of the understanding which, while not conceptual, is still an organizing force, subjecting sensation to the minimal categories of time, space and causality

²² Beckett (1965), p. 22. ²³ Schopenhauer (1969), Vol. I, p. 264. ²⁴ Beckett (1965), p. 231.

²⁵ Beckett (1965), p. 12, p. 30.

²⁶ Beckett (1965), p. 85. For Schopenhauer see Letter to Thomas McGreevy, c. 18–25 July 1930, *LSBr*, pp. 31–35, pp. 32–33.

²⁷ Schopenhauer (1974), p. 78.

to produce a viable representation. On the other hand, however, Schopenhauer often returns to sheer bodily materiality as the ground of experience. In this respect the following is typical: 'all thinking is a physiological function of the brain, just as digestion is of the stomach'.²⁸ As a result it is simply not clear in the German philosopher's work what the relation is between an intuitive cognition, the production of a representation, and pure sensation as datum. And things become even more unclear where the relationship between body, brain and nervous system and the aesthetic image is concerned. Yet there are several moments, in *Dream*, where Beckett strongly suggests that all three of these elements can simply be elided, for example the description, quoted earlier, of beauty as 'music and whiteness facts in the fact of my mind'.

What is more, when we turn to Schopenhauer's proposals for a specifically aesthetic perception, it is the *absence* of emotion and affect, the detachment from worldly suffering, that is famously key. In such circumstances we 'discard entirely our own personality for a time, in order to remain *pure knowing subject*, the clear eye of the world'.²⁹ Beckett asserts an almost identical 'pure perception of a pure subject' towards the end of *Proust*, which contrasts with what he calls 'the caricature furnished by direct perception', or again 'the abject and indigestible husks of direct contact with the material and concrete'.³⁰ There is a clear shift here from the 'direct expression' of 'Dante . . . Bruno'. Directness and immediacy are not now valued in the same physical, bodily terms as before. The aspiration is towards something much more rarefied and, as Beckett puts it more than once, 'immaterial'. This is further borne out when 'the joys and sorrows of the body' are dismissed as mere 'superfoetations', as compared to 'the only world that has reality and significance, the world of our own latent consciousness'.³¹ Or the even more stark rejection of affect and the material body at the end of the essay, when Beckett returns approvingly to Proust's pure 'transcendental apperception'. This he describes as 'contemplative, a pure act of understanding, will-less', as distinct from the 'still, almost breathless passion' of the youth in Giorgione's *Concerto*, where 'the spirit [is] shattered in corruption, damp and rotting'. In the latter case, and in the examples from Keats and d'Annunzio, which Beckett also supplies, there is a continuity between the sensuous body and the temporal flow of the material world, but it is given the strongly negative,

²⁸ Schopenhauer (2000). ²⁹ Schopenhauer (1969), pp. 185–186. My italics.

³⁰ Beckett (1965), p. 89, p. 65. ³¹ Beckett (1965), p. 13.

entropic inflection that will be picked up again in *Dream*'s treatment of Rembrandt's *Self Portrait*.

And yet despite all this it remains true that often in *Proust* we find a notion of perception and the aesthetic that emphasizes both the physiological and the emotional as much as it does dispassion and the impersonal. Why might this be so? One clue comes as the essay is dismissing the habitual and inauthentic nature of voluntary memory. Here Beckett writes that 'the images it chooses are as arbitrary as those chosen by imagination, *and are equally remote from reality*'.³² Voluntary memory and the imagination are thus equated, and both found wanting. It is this post-Romantic suspicion of the imagination, repeated on a number of occasions, that accounts for Beckett's contrary tropism towards the material, empirical body, even as he extols the virtues of the timeless, impassive Idea. Thus at one point aesthetic experience is described as dependent upon the 'tense and provisional lucidity of the nervous system'.³³ Similarly, involuntary memory – which is consistently elided with aesthetic experience in the essay – is seen as material inscription: 'we can only remember what has been registered by our extreme inattention and stored in that ultimate and inaccessible dungeon of our being to which Habit does not possess the key'.³⁴ The notion of registration and storage here implies a material notion of the trace that recalls Freud's early, strongly physiological account of the psyche. Elsewhere in the essay Beckett even reaches back to Vico's historical poetics, and compares involuntary memory to what he calls 'an intellectual animism', the latter being the psychic investment of fetish objects with human characteristics.³⁵ Here again there returns a familiar sense of material, 'direct' continuity between self and world.

These ideas are also present in *Dream*'s repeated motif of a gaze upon the sky or the sea, which again takes up the idea of an agitation of molecules derived from de Gaultier:

Does he remain bowed over the rail, his hair in the wind, his spectacles in the breast of his reefer, peering at the seethe of flowers, the silver fizz of flowers, scored by the prow? Suppose, for the sake of argument, that he does. Then in his brain also the molecules must ferment in sympathy, panic-stricken they must seethe.³⁶

Belacqua considers throwing himself off the boat and into the sea at this point, and it is notable that the physiological description of a direct

³² Beckett (1965), p. 32. My italics.

³³ Beckett (1965), p. 21.

³⁴ Beckett (1965), p. 31.

³⁵ Beckett (1965), p. 36.

³⁶ Beckett (1992), p. 134.

relation between subject and object here, with the seething molecules repeating the silvery fizz of the water, suggests also an emotional empathy. As I have argued, Beckett's aesthetic of the statement, in the poem 'Alba' and elsewhere, often seems to rely on Schopenhauer's sense of dispassion and objectivity. In the quotation above, and at other points in *Dream*, however, the terms passion and dispassion, subjectivity and objectivity, cannot be disentangled so easily. This elision is at its most obvious, perhaps, in the scene where Belacqua discusses his poetics:

There is a shortness of poetic sight . . . when the image of the emotion is focused before the verbal retina; and a longness of same, when it is focused behind. There is an authentic trend from that short-sightedness to this long-sightedness. Poetry is not concerned with normal vision, when word and image coincide. I have moved from the short-sighted poem of which you spoke to the long-sighted one of which I now speak. Here the word is prolonged by the emotion instead of the emotion being gathered into and closed by the word . . . I have expressed myself more totally in the long-sighted mode. I dislike the word better.³⁷

Beckett's notion of the 'verbal retina' here, the total identification of word and eye, nicely captures the way he sees the literary word surface, the physiology of the body and the world as isomorphic. To see language as a verbal retina is to materialize and somaticize it. There is a clear continuity here between the passages drawing on Gaultier's work, where the image is understood as a direct stimulus of the molecules of the brain.

Three significant ideas appear in Belacqua's mini-manifesto: emotion, word and image. The first, emotion, we can fairly straightforwardly assimilate to that continuum of terms that Beckett's earliest poetics associates with non-conceptualized experience: passion, feeling, sense. The other two terms, word and image, both mediate this experience, but Beckett now makes a previously absent distinction between them. More precisely, Beckett distinguishes between two forms of the image, corresponding to two relations between word and emotion. In one, 'short-sighted' relation, emotion is 'gathered into and closed by the word'. This clearly accords with the kind of abstracting image Beckett eschews, one that limits affect through generalization. It is the conventional mode of literary writing. In the other 'long-sighted' mode, the emotion is said to prolong the word.³⁸

³⁷ Beckett (1992), p. 170.

³⁸ There is a distant echo here of Yeats' 'The Symbolism of Poetry': 'The function of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation', a thought that is itself strongly indebted to Pater. See Yeats (1961), p. 159.

That is to say, the emotion is primary, the image remains in immediate contact with both the emotional and the physiological drives, resulting in a kind of extrusion or mutation of the word: hence the word is seen as a material, malleable entity. The word becomes, in a term that will assume immense significance, plastic.

I want to turn back now to Beckett's essay *Proust* in order to consider these ideas more closely. In the book's celebrated description of involuntary memory, what Beckett calls a 'pure act of cognition' in the past is reactivated in the present by a similar act, so that 'the total past sensation, not its echo or its copy, but the sensation itself' returns. As a result 'the experience is at once imaginative and empirical, at once an evocation and a direct perception, real without being merely actual, ideal without being merely abstract'.³⁹ In the context of the hesitation between the material body and the ideal artwork that we have been tracing, it is the role of the empirical in this dualism that I want to stress. The idea of 'direct perception', castigated previously in the essay as 'a caricature', is now recruited to supply the empirical balance to imaginative evocation. It seems that Beckett is concerned to distinguish his position from one in which the art object is completely idealized or transcendental, and so attempts to ground the image in materiality and the real even at the risk of contradiction. It is this that accounts for his attraction to Gaudier's description of the agitation of molecules in the brain, for example. A similar treatment of the image in terms of its physiological impact occurs when Beckett argues that 'for the artist the only possible hierarchy in the world of objective phenomena is represented by a table of their respective coefficients of penetration, that is to say, in terms of the subject'.⁴⁰ Such an idea of an object's ability to reach deep into the body of the subject, taking up residence there as a criterion for the successful image, is absolutely essential to a vitalist strain in Beckett's thought at this time. It is the corollary of Belacqua's idea of a long-sighted poetry, where the image lies behind the 'verbal retina', in touch with the emotions and the body, and thereby exerting a distorting force on the material of representation. For Beckett without such a physiological, empirical ballast 'imagination . . . is exercised in vacuo and cannot tolerate the limits of the real'.⁴¹ As a result *Proust* calls for 'a participation between . . . symbol and substance' that is

³⁹ Beckett (1965), p. 75. ⁴⁰ Beckett (1965), p. 84.

⁴¹ Beckett (1965), p. 74. In this he was undoubtedly influenced by the Joycean circle's antipathy to Surrealism with its emphasis on fantasy and an imagination completely liberated from the real.

conceived in resolutely material and bodily terms, while also somehow still insisting on timelessness and disinterest.⁴²

If we turn to Beckett's analysis of one of Proust's characters in particular, we can clearly see him working through these concerns. The narrator's first glimpse of Albertine, a 'pure act of understanding-intuition', as Beckett later describes it in Schopenhauer's terms, relies on familiar modernist notions of the artwork as timeless, opaque and disinterested.⁴³ Thus she is 'ineffable and inaccessible', and, with specific reference to painting, as 'eternally and hermetically exclusive as a frieze or a frescoed cortege'.⁴⁴ Slightly later, however, Beckett introduces two further modes of the image, comparing two sets of encounters with Albertine in terms of an opposition between an arbitrary, superficial 'realist' image, and one that penetrates the body of the narrator. This contrast is explicitly thematised in terms of a distinction between a 'pictorial multiplicity' and 'a plastic and moral multiplicity'. Note the approving use of the term 'plastic' here, which is privileged as

no longer a mere *superficies* and an effect of the observer's angle of approach rather than the expression of an *inward and active* variety, but a *multiplicity in depth*, a turmoil of objective and immanent contradictions over which the subject has no control.⁴⁵

This passage can illuminate the ambivalence in Beckett's aesthetic thought set out above. While *pictorial* multiplicity is the mere 'effect' of many subjective points of view on an object, the *plastic* is an 'expression' of something more profound, reminding us of the 'direct expression' of Vico and *Work in Progress*. In the case of the pictorial, it is evident that Beckett is speaking of the 'superficial' account of Albertine's changing appearance at different points in the novel. The moments in Proust's narrative where Albertine is seen from the outside, so to speak, are examples of what in *Dream* Beckett called a shortness of poetic sight: familiar 'realist' visual images that register changes in perspective on the object, relying on a standard subject–object dualism. This recalls Bergson's critique of what he termed cinematographic thinking: 'Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially. We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality.'⁴⁶

⁴² Beckett (1965), p. 74.

⁴³ Beckett (1965), p. 61.

⁴⁴ Beckett (1965), pp. 45–46.

⁴⁵ Beckett (1965), p. 47. My italics.

⁴⁶ Bergson (1922), p. 322.

Plastic multiplicity, by contrast, implies a long-sighted poetics that traces the essential. Yet note that this moment is explicitly distinguished from the narrator's very first encounter with Albertine. As stated earlier, the original image is described in familiar 'disinterested' terms as a unit that is 'ineffable and inaccessible', 'eternal and hermetic'. Here time is suspended. When he introduces the plastic image, however, Beckett, as in the verbal retina passage from *Dream*, describes it in terms of depth, a movement below or behind the surface. That Beckett still has a physiological model in mind for this plasticity becomes clear when he writes, referring to the 'immanent contradictions' of the 'multiplicity in depth' – and evoking both the experimental psychologist William Wundt and Kant as he does so – that 'the multiple aspects (read Blickpunkt for this miserable word) [do] not bind into any positive synthesis.'⁴⁷ The dismissal of synthesis here is crucial, in that it confirms that Beckett is contrasting a transcendental dualism that successfully synthesizes intuition and understanding, with something else. That something else is what Beckett calls, right at the start of *Proust*, a 'dualism in multiplicity'.⁴⁸ For it is with this paradoxical term that Beckett acknowledges the tension in his essay between two forms of the modernist image. One is the autonomous, timeless image, drawing on the dualism of Kant and Schopenhauer, the other is the more vitalist, positivist and directly perceived image, drawing on Bergson and contemporary psychological and scientific discourses. The plastic image draws on both, and Beckett understands it primarily in terms of painting.

In Proust's portrayal of Albertine, according to Beckett, the resistance of the plastic image to Kantian synthesis completes 'the transformation of a creature of surface into a creature of depth. Accomplishes the solidification of a profile'.⁴⁹ The last phrase is particularly intriguing in its reconciliation of surface with depth. A profile is clearly a two-dimensional image, but to speak of its solidification is not to turn two dimensions into three. In the terms of painting, which are those that are being evoked here in the opposition between the pictorial and the plastic, such a solidification must take place on the material surface of the canvas itself: it is a matter of lending weight to the profile by drawing on the resources of painterly technique. Roger Fry, in his 1911 essay 'Plastic Design', uses the same opposition Beckett does as part of his critique of British art: 'it is the peculiar disadvantage of our national temperament . . . that [the] plastic structural imagination is so little developed. This reacts almost as

⁴⁷ Bergson (1922), p. 85.

⁴⁸ Bergson (1922), p. 11

⁴⁹ Bergson (1922), p. 50.

disastrously on our painting as upon our sculpture. Our pictures suffer from our excessive fondness for the pictorial.⁵⁰ This idea of the pictorial as a negative quality is common to both Fry and Beckett, as is the promotion of the plastic as an alternative. According to Fry the great achievement of Cézanne, for example, lies in the tension between the volume he was able to lend to his landscapes and still lives and his simultaneous insistence on the constraints of the two-dimensional nature of the support. As a consequence, for Fry and others in the early years of the century, Cézanne's experiments with form and material captured a deeper and more permanent truth than mere pictorial mimesis. Beckett seems to want to say the same thing of Proust. Indeed we could gloss and illuminate Beckett's difficult passage on the pictorial and the plastic by applying its terms to Cézanne. This was a painter who was not interested in the mere appearance of the object to a subjective observer. Rather he attempts to reproduce, by exploiting the material resources of the art object, what Beckett calls above the 'objective and immanent contradictions' native to all objects.

Beckett's understanding of what he calls the 'Proustian procedure' in terms of Giotto's frescos of the Virtues and Vices in the Scrovegni Chapel at Padua can throw a little more light on his appropriation of the plastic as a key critical term. Once again the pictorial is used in Fry's negative sense, this time in concert with Schopenhauer's notion of art's role as revealer of the Idea: 'Proust does not deal in concepts, he pursues the Idea, the concrete. He admires the frescoes of the Paduan Arena because their symbolism is handled as a reality.'⁵¹ For Schopenhauer the Idea lies somewhere between the thing-in-itself and phenomena. Not to be confused with an ideal Platonic form, the idea is intrinsic. In grasping it, one does not see through individuals to the ghostly form beyond, rather each individual thing is seen in and as its thingly essence. *The World as Will and Representation* stresses the difference between apprehension of the Idea, and conventional non-conceptual cognition that remains subject to the categories of time, space and causality:

[i]t has laid aside . . . the subordinate forms of the phenomenon, all of which we include under the principle of sufficient reason [i.e. the categories of time, space and causality], *or rather it has not yet entered into them*. But it has retained the first and most universal form, namely that of the representation in general, that of being object for a subject . . . Therefore it alone is the most adequate objectivity possible of the will or of the

⁵⁰ Fry (1996), p. 138.

⁵¹ Beckett (1965), p. 79.

thing in itself; indeed it is even the whole thing in itself, only under the form of the representation.⁵²

Here Schopenhauer suggests that the Idea inhabits a point anterior to the intervention of the understanding in the treatment of sensation, and does so as a kind of zero-degree of representation, 'the first and most universal form [of the phenomena] . . . that of being subject for an object'. It is this stark, formal *isolation* of the image, its removal from relation, rather than its sensuous qualities, that virtually conflate it with the thing-in-itself, and it is this aspect that Beckett will eventually latch onto in his writing on Bram van Velde. *Proust*, and its idea of the plastic, is the first step in a long journey towards this. Yet in 1930 Beckett remains attached to a vitalist, Bergsonian influence that cashes out in the anomalies and contradictions that I have been identifying.

Nevertheless, although Beckett seems to distinguish Schopenhauer's Idea from the plastic when he considers Proust's Albertine, in his analysis of Proust's Giotto the two seem to be very close. These frescoes are important because the image is 'special, literal and concrete, and . . . not merely the *pictorial* transmission of a notion'.⁵³ If they are not pictorial, the implication is, they must be *plastic*, displaying the essential, material quality that lends an image immediacy and presence. Beckett is referring to the following moment in *Swann's Way*:

the special beauty of these frescoes lay in the great part played in each of them by its symbols, while the fact that these were depicted, not as symbols, for the thought symbolised was nowhere expressed, but as real things, actually felt or materially handled, added something more precise and more literal to their meaning, something more concrete and more striking to the lesson they imparted.⁵⁴

The key contention here is that Giotto paints symbols as if they were real entities or objects, and not simply vehicles for a content that has separately significant meaning. This is best illustrated by Giotto's fresco for 'Envy', and Proust's comments thereon. The fresco depicts a figure with a snake emerging from her mouth with the result, as Proust emphasizes, that 'the muscles of her cheeks are strained in order to contain it, like a child's who is filling a balloon with his breath, and Envy's attention – and ours as well when we look at her – concentrated entirely on the action of her lips, has scarcely any time to spare for envious thoughts.'⁵⁵ The point is that though

⁵² Schopenhauer (1969), Vol. 1, p. 175. ⁵³ Beckett (1965), p. 79

⁵⁴ Proust (2013), pp. 92–93. ⁵⁵ Proust (2013), 92.

the serpent is of course a symbol of envy, and is being used here as such, Giotto departs from tradition through the unprecedented realism of his treatment of both the snake and the woman's body, his emphasis on the strain on her mouth and face. Although the painting is 'about' envy, we and she have no opportunity for a consideration of a further referent, but rather are immersed in a palpable immediacy. And yet, even though the fresco mobilizes an intensely realistic command of detail in its depiction of the symbol, it could not be described as realist in the traditional sense. It is instead, as Beckett puts it, a 'living symbol', and Beckett makes clear that it is this vital, sensuous quality that separates both Giotto and Proust from someone like Baudelaire, whose work is 'intellectual symbolism . . . abstract and discursive'.⁵⁶ Crucially, in a phrase paralleling Alba's 'statement of itself', Beckett immediately goes on to argue that while Giotto's image is 'a living symbol', it is also a 'symbol of itself'. Here again is the combination of vital immediacy and formal hermeticism that runs throughout *Proust* and which Beckett calls the plastic.

Beckett's recourse to painting and art criticism and the issues of surface, depth and representation he raises, can also be examined through a consideration of the Trinity College lectures on Racine and the Modern Novel in 1931. His discussions of *Andromaque*, *Phèdre* and *Bérénice* see these texts in profoundly formal and visual terms. This is particularly apparent in the analysis of the imagery of *Andromaque*, and it is here that painting begins to assume a central significance as aesthetic exemplar. His approach to the text constantly transforms the literary into the plastic: 'notice . . . the way he can call up pictures' Beckett says, insisting on the 'influence of painting and sculpture on Racine'.⁵⁷ But it is he himself who pushes this aspect to an extreme, by ranging across the play and selecting vivid, isolated, sensuous visual images, such as those of blood and fire, in order to note how they appear and reappear in different formal configurations. It is as if Beckett wants to arrest the narrative flow of the play, to translate the diachrony of literature into a synchrony. Such a desire is clearly present in his suggestion that in *Bérénice* 'the conclusion of the play is an intensification not modification of the opening'.⁵⁸ As Brigitte le Juez puts it, for Beckett there is no time in Racine, but we can perhaps think this another way by saying that Beckett turns *Andromaque* from a play into a painting.⁵⁹ Here again, as with 'Alba' and Beckett's appropriation of the concept of the plastic from the visual arts, a tension between timelessness

⁵⁶ Beckett (1965), p. 79. ⁵⁷ McKinley (2006), pp. 307–313, p. 312.

⁵⁸ McKinley (2006), p. 312. ⁵⁹ Juez (2007), p. 47.



Figure 1.1 Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice*,
© RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre)

and vital transformation emerges in his aesthetic thought, but the nature of the theatre allows a resolution that avoids the contradictions we detected in Proust.

The turn from time to space is particularly clear in the section ‘Background in Racine’, which I reproduce here from Grace McKinley’s notes:

Note the discretion with which Racine grades his background: provides reader with depth of perspective, or plane; e.g.. in *Andromaque*: we have: Troy, (smoke, walls of Troy, Hector, Priam). Then the palace of Pyrrhus himself separated from Troy by the sea, all of which is given by the lines *Je sais de ce palais tous le détours*.

N.B. *Three Depths of Perspective*

1. Palace
2. Sea
3. Unextinguished flames of Troy

Racine’s background is for the artist not for the psychologist.⁶⁰

On reading this one imagines a pastoral landscape with distant Classical architecture and an expanse of water in the mid-ground. One such

⁶⁰ McKinley (2006), p. 309.

painting is Poussin's *Descent of Orpheus*, which was hanging in the Louvre at the time and has a burning Castel Sant'Angelo prominent in the background. Such an association with Poussin would not have been unusual, in that both he and Racine were seen as exemplary figures of the French seventeenth-century during the neoclassical revival of the 1920s and 1930s. Even so, Beckett's procedure is idiosyncratic, for there can be no question of a backdrop or anything like it on Racine's famously bare stage. Beckett's transformation of the text into visual terms is thus entirely invented, and consideration of it can again help us to get the measure of his developing poetics.

The first line reproduced in italics above – '*Je sais de ce palais tous le détours*' – is taken from Pylade's speech in Act 3 Scene 2.⁶¹ Though Racine makes mention of the walls of Troy, however, there is no reference to the smoke that Beckett notes here in parenthesis, nor to the 'unextinguished flames' he records in section 3. Rather, the passage that Beckett has in mind for these details must be Act 1 Scene 2, where Pyrrhus remembers Troy before and after the war: 'Yes my Lord, beneath the burning walls of Troy/the blood-covered victors shared out their spoils.'⁶²

This reference to 'the blood-covered victors' is useful in interpreting Beckett's next step, which is to argue that for Racine 'the work of background is to give substance to the characters'.⁶³ The suggestion seems to be that in Racine key past events are summoned by repeated intensely visual images in the dialogue, images – such as that of blood – that are attached to individual characters. Thus what Beckett is describing is not strictly a backdrop at all, in the sense that his painterly talk of perspective and planes suggests. Rather, as he puts it: 'blood, fire etc. are there as so many *accretions* of character', charging individuals with traces of past events in the way that Proust's images of involuntary memory bring together the present and the past, the real and the ideal. Beckett's use of words like 'substance' and 'accretion' to describe this process accords with his emphasis on the concrete nature of Proust's writing. The elemental images of blood and fire that Beckett speaks of thus seem, as we shall see, to function in a similar way to Giotto's symbols.

At one point Beckett supplies the following example of the kind of image-making he admires in Racine: 'the description of Andromaque's first encounter with Pyrrhus gives tone to all the others, Pyrrhus covered with blood etc. – and this plays its part in future encounters.'⁶⁴ The reference is

⁶¹ Racine (1917), p. 103.

⁶² Racine (1917), p. 78. My translation.

⁶³ McKinley (2006), p. 309.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

to those lines in Act 1 Scene 4 where Pyrrhus says: 'I have done wrong, without a doubt; in Phrygia/ a hundred times my hands were red with your people's blood'.⁶⁵ But Beckett must also have in mind Andromaque's 'Songe Songe' speech of Act 3 Scene 8, which he highlights later as an example of Racine's intensely visual language.⁶⁶ Here again blood and fire conjoin, this time in the context of a description of Pyrrhus, one that begins with an overt appeal to the visual imagination:

Imagine Pyrrhus, his eyes aglitter,
Caught in the glow of our burning palace,
Covered with blood⁶⁷

According to Beckett, Racine's purpose in creating these vividly imagistic 'backgrounds' for his characters is not to 'explain Andromaque by Troy etc. as Balzac would have done'.⁶⁸ That is to say, Racine does not use references to past events to justify present actions. There is an echo of *Proust* here, where Beckett approves of the way that Dostoevsky 'states his characters without explaining them'.⁶⁹ But the Racine lectures also develop formal and aesthetic assumptions outlined earlier in the essays on Joyce and Proust. Specifically, the immediately visual and embodied nature of the theatrical experience enables Beckett to refine his thinking about the image and its material support, and the relations between the conceptual and the sensuous, surface and substance that compose it. His account of the way certain visual images in the dialogue add substance to characters must be grasped in the context of the latter's material presence onstage. The relationship between Racine's often static and formally dressed characters, and the vivid images of the speeches they enunciate, ensures that the plastic relationship between form and content, abstraction and sense we have been pursuing is played out with particular force. On the one hand, the virtual images are mobilized by the audience-member, even as he or she is confronted by the physicality of the character onstage. The image of Pyrrhus drenched in blood in the past, for example, does not, indeed cannot, transport us away from the material presence of the character as he appears. At the same time, the powerful sensuality of that declaimed image charges the decorum of the Classical staging with affect. What results once again is an elision of the dualism of sense and abstraction, as opposed to the situation in Balzac, for example, where, as Beckett says, the 'background' or past history of a figure 'is a devouring thing to

⁶⁵ Racine (1917), p. 83 ⁶⁶ Racine (1917), p. 112; McKinley (2006), p. 312.

⁶⁷ McKinley (2006), p. 309. ⁶⁸ McKinley (2006), p. 309. ⁶⁹ Beckett (1965), p. 87.

his characters'.⁷⁰ Instead Racine's 'background' – the bloody past events of the war that Beckett pictures to himself as a canvas by Poussin – exists in the visual imagination as immanent to the play's present onstage.

There is an evident affinity between this depiction of the Racinian stage and Beckett's reading of Proust's Giotto. In each case the presence of the material sign is not sacrificed to another realm of meaning, but intensified through a form of immanent contradiction. As he puts it in the lectures, using the same terms he does in *Proust* and again, through reference to the pictorial, evoking painting:

Racine did not waste anything – by pictorial beauty of his treatment he achieved something. Poetical beauty is not all. *His mind recoils from what is remote to what is actual and present.* Direct expression brutal with Racine. Invisible milieu in Phèdre – light in the play.⁷¹

Here we can see the notion of 'direct expression' from 'Dante...Vico' being put to work once more ('pictorial beauty' does not seem to have the negative valence here that it will have in *Proust*, but rather simply refers to the visual qualities of Racine's language). The emphasis is on the power of an image when its presence is sufficiently intimate and immediate to frustrate its conceptual determination.

All of which can be further refined if we turn again to the novel Beckett began to write while he was giving the lectures on 'Racine and the Modern Novel', *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. Specifically, we can look at an early moment in the book where, in the course of a passage dealing with a named painting, he extracts a section from the Racine lectures for inclusion. The painting is Franciabigio's *Portrait of a Young Man*, which Beckett would have seen at the Louvre. Beckett begins the relevant section by rejecting the chronological and deterministic aspects of Balzac's typical forms of characterization, before abruptly moving on to the painting itself:

[m]ilieu, race, family, structure, temperament, past and present and consequent and antecedent back to the first combinations and the papas and mamas and paramours and cisisbei and the morals of Nanny and the nursery wallpapers and the third and fourth generation snuffles . . . The background pushed up as a guarantee . . . that tires us. The only perspective worth stating is the site of the unknotting that could be, landscape of a dream of integration, prospective, that of Franciabigio's young Florentine in the Louvre, into which it is pleasant to believe he may, gladly or sadly, no matter, recede, from which he has not necessarily emerged.⁷²

⁷⁰ McKinley (2006), p. 309.

⁷¹ McKinley (2006), p. 312. My italics.

⁷² Beckett (1992), p. 13.

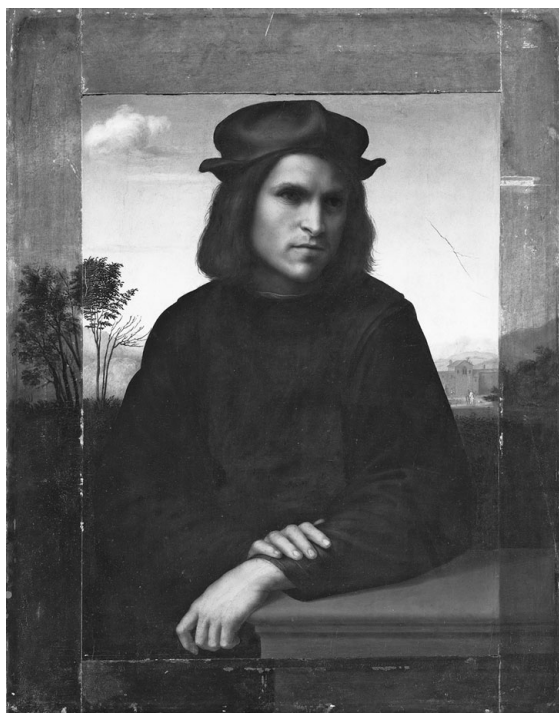


Figure 1.2 Franciabigio, *Portrait of a Man*, photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre)

The background details of psychology, family and race, facts that are often seen as having explanatory power in understanding behaviour and motivation, are here dismissed as ‘guarantees’, elements that are used by writers to underpin and account for a fictional character’s predicament and thereby render it plausible. Beckett introduces an alternative to this style of characterization by adapting the following line from his discussion of background in the Racine lectures: ‘The interesting part of the background is the suggestion of the place where the unknotting will take place. Prospective as opposed to perspective.’⁷³ In the novel this final phrase is extended to accommodate two further key terms, becoming: ‘the only perspective worth stating is the site of the unknotting that could be, landscape of a dream of integration, prospective.’⁷⁴

⁷³ McKinley (2006), p. 309.

⁷⁴ Beckett (1992), p. 13.

We should note first of all the return of the idea of the statement here, but it is the notion of a 'landscape of integration' that is most helpful in elucidating Beckett's conception of the background in Racine and, by extension, in his own work. As we have seen, Beckett's lectures imagine the events that precede the action of *Andromaque* in terms of a landscape painting, reflecting his highly visual sense of the role of the verbal image in the play. The quotation from *Dream* does something similar, but in the process makes Beckett's intentions in the lectures slightly clearer. In *Dream* the spatialization of time into the visual terms of landscape means that past events, while accorded their due significance, can no longer be seen as 'guarantees', i.e. determining factors, historical or biographical, that might account for or explain a character's acts in the present. Rather, by way of Franciabigio's portrait, temporality is conceived, in Beckett's gnomic phrase, as the site of an 'unknotting that could be'. The focus has thus shifted from seeing character as an actualization of a sense of the past, to a dramatization of the unpredictable outcomes of the immediate present. By representing temporal markers spatially, painting thus stymies the kind of teleological thinking Beckett objects to in Balzac.

We can gloss this assertion with the help of the picture itself. Franciabigio's *Young Man* places its figure in a Tuscan landscape, one that is organized in the classic manner into three receding planes. As a consequence there is a clearly defined relationship between figure and ground: we know that the focus of the painting is the young man; however, we are also aware that he is in some sense the product of the cultivated landscape in which he is framed. This is what Beckett means when he says that it is pleasant to think that the young man might recede back into this landscape, might easily return to take up his place beside the promenading couple and fortified town that frame and define him. He belongs. For Beckett such a notion of landscape implies a corresponding notion of time: this young man is a product not only of the landscape, but of the history it encodes. Perspectival depth in painting is thus the correlative of Balzacian determination in narrative.

In the lower section of the painting the young man's figure is, by contrast, almost completely indistinguishable from its ground, and traditional perspective is abolished. Rather than an obvious hierarchy between the pictorial elements, the whole surface of the picture plane must be given equal attention. If there is no longer any priority between foreground and background, neither can there be, in Beckett's terms, any notion of causal relationship between them. Landscape and figure are in flux, their boundaries indeterminate, and a corollary of this is that one cannot precede the

other in time. Both occupy the same contingent moment, rather than being two distinct temporal spaces with one antedating and determining the other. This is the import of Beckett's assertion that rather than receding into the landscape, the young man has 'not necessarily emerged' from it.⁷⁵ That is to say, his relationship with the landscape has not yet been fully defined or stabilized. Rachel Burrow's notes on the lectures differ slightly from McKinley's: 'the only interesting use of background is the perspective, the country into which one is pleased to think the figure may recede but from which the present emerged', Beckett says.⁷⁶ It is clearer here that the notion of time corresponding to this conception of the painting is one of immediate contingency and immanent emergence. Rather than teleology we have process.

Once again Beckett draws on painting to propose an aesthetic that insists on the immediate presence of the sign, one that does not defer to another realm of meaning or experience. The significance of the young man does not reside in the landscape, one does not move from an immediately proximate figure to a more distant ground to seek an explanation, symbolic or otherwise, for his presence. Rather the whole painting is proximate, immanent, a statement of itself. And here, as often in *Proust*, Beckett's term for this achievement is that of integration: 'landscape of a dream of integration'. *Dream* thus suggests that Beckett uses the latter term to refer to painting's capacity to represent temporality spatially, and thus in a non-teleological manner. While there are connections here with *Proust*'s notion of the 'immanent contradictions' of the plastic image, we are now a long way from Schopenhauer. Beckett's concern to acknowledge temporality in some pure, intensive form departs completely from the eternal, timeless rhetoric of the aesthetic Idea. The catalyst for this departure, as suggested earlier, is Bergson, and in the rest of this chapter I want to examine the context and impact of his influence more closely.

The issues of perspective and temporality that Beckett explores through *Portrait of a Young Man* were very much alive in the art-critical debates of the period in which his first novel was written. The extraordinary ferment of ideas that surrounded the emergence of Cubism in the Paris of the period just before the First World War had placed them centre-stage. Informed by Bergson's philosophy and Poincaré's non-Euclidean mathematics, various groupings, most famously Picasso and Braque, but also the Puteaux cubists Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, as well as poets like Apollinaire and Max Jacob, had sought to challenge

⁷⁵ Beckett (1992), p. 13.

⁷⁶ Quoted in le Juez (2008), p. 61.

conventions concerning the communication of subjective experience and the objective representation of space.

Beckett's attacks on Balzac's representation of character in *Proust*, *Dream* and the Trinity lectures draw on Cubism's intellectual hinterland. Throughout the lectures Beckett couches his critique of what he calls 'naturalism' in terms of painting, vision and space. Thus Flaubert earns praise because he is not a 'photographer or image-monger' (another echo of Bergson's objections to cinematographic thinking here), while Balzac's outdated approach means that 'all reality is a determined statistical entity'. As a result, 'Balzac paints like David' while 'Dostoevsky [paints] like Rembrandt'.⁷⁷ The references to Rembrandt as a model for fiction in the lectures clearly lie behind the treatment of the painter in *Dream*. However, the dismissal of Balzac's characterization in terms of geometry and statistics are also important, in that they echo the Bergsonian critique of the artificial quantification of experience that had such an impact on Cubist painting. Indeed Beckett explicitly refers in his lectures to the 'authentic incoherence of post-Bergsonian thought', and it is the artistic representation of such incoherence in which he is primarily interested.⁷⁸ The following extract from Rachel Burrows' lecture notes demonstrates the Bergsonian opposition between abstract intelligence and lived intuition (or in Kantian terms between concept and sensation) that Beckett approves of:

conflict v. intelligence & intuition. Bergson – interested in this . . . Suggests that intuition can achieve a total vision that intelligence can't. Philosophical visionary – position like . . . Rimbaud. Passionate justification of 'La vision intuitive' . . . 'originalité', 'feuilleté', 'imprevisibilité', as artistic attributes. Flaubert had last. Taken up by Symbolistes and Dadaists – last interested in his idea of inadequacy of the word to translated impressions registered by instinct.⁷⁹

The reference to the Dadaist opposition between the word and the 'registration' of instinctual 'impressions' again raises Beckett's interest in perception in the context of a broadly physiological framework. The use of the term 'instinct' here conforms to the centrally important role it plays in Bergson's philosophy, and Beckett will also refer to instinct in *Proust*. But it is Bergson's dismissal of both geometry and what he called clock-time, as artificial impositions on immediate experience, that finds an immediate echo in *Dream*. The narrator puts it succinctly: 'we all love and lick up

⁷⁷ Le Juez (2008), p. 29.

⁷⁸ Burrows (1931).

⁷⁹ Burrows (1931), pp. 4–5.

Balzac, we lap it up and say it is wonderful, but why call a distillation of Euclid and Perrault *Scenes from Life*? Why *human* comedy?’⁸⁰ This reference to Euclid again alludes to early twentieth-century debates on the visual arts, and to Bergson’s influence thereon. Euclidean geometry and its corollary in painting – one-point perspective – were spatial conceptions that the great Cubist experiments of the early part of the century challenged fundamentally. By associating Balzac with Euclid, Beckett allies the writer to a traditional attitude to space that was one of the principle targets of the Cubist revolution. In *The Cubist Painters*, for example, Guillaume Apollinaire had argued that: ‘today, scientists no longer limit themselves to the three dimensions of Euclid. The painters have been led quite naturally, one might say by intuition, to preoccupy themselves with the new possibilities of spatial measurement.’⁸¹ Apollinaire’s somewhat self-conscious reference here to ‘intuition’ – what Beckett in the quotation above calls ‘la vision intuitive’ – signals the importance of Bergson to this non- or post-Euclidean attitude.

As Mark Antliff has conclusively shown, Bergson’s ideas were absolutely fundamental to painters like Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, as demonstrated in their book *Du Cubisme*, translated into English as *Cubism*.⁸² In this text the two painters draw on Bergson to argue that cubist space, with all its ambiguities, condensations and faceted fluidity, is able to communicate the artist’s subjective experience of perception with much more authenticity and immediacy than Renaissance perspective. For these painters Cubism was concerned above all with the representation of sensuous experience, the time-based processes of perception. As we have just seen this is also an important concern for Beckett in the early 1930s. *Proust*’s hesitations over the timeless and eternal aspects of the Idea, and its sporadic attempts to define an alternative or complementary aesthetic of immanence and multiplicity, recall these avant-garde debates which were still live in 1930.

The Puteaux artists’ emphasis on painting as a record of perception was shared with Unanimism. Indeed Antliff argues that it was the founder of the latter movement, Jules Romains, who first introduced Gleizes and Metzinger to Bergson, and that their version of Cubism was heavily influenced by Unanimist theories.⁸³ As mentioned in my Introduction, Beckett began his MA dissertation on Unanimism before he left for Paris in 1928.⁸⁴ It may have been through this interest that he began to think

⁸⁰ Beckett (1992), p. 119. ⁸¹ Chipp et al. (1984), pp. 223–224.

⁸² Gleizes and Metzinger (1913). ⁸³ See Antliff (1988), pp. 341–349.

⁸⁴ Knowlson (1992), p. 75.

seriously about the literary applications of Bergson's philosophy. It is surely possible that this in turn may have lead him to *Cubism*. Certainly Beckett's Trinity mentor, Thomas Rudmose-Brown, was aware of the significance of the book, for in the chapter he wrote for the 1925 edition of George Saintsbury's *Primer of French Literature*, when dealing with what he calls 'purely artistic criticism', he refers to 'a number of authors of monographs, among whom may be mentioned . . . the painters André Lhote and Albert Gleizes.'⁸⁵ We have already seen how Beckett drew his important early concept of 'direct expression' from this chapter of the *Primer*, and it is worth noting here that it is the Unanimists that Rudmose-Brown dignifies with the phrase.⁸⁶ The Gleizes monograph mentioned must be *Cubism*, a text that confirms Rudmose-Brown's arguments throughout the chapter for the immense influence of Bergson on contemporary French aesthetics. It is surely highly likely that he would have recommended the book to his brilliant young student as he worked on Unanimism. In any event, there are terminological parallels between *Cubism* and *Dream* that suggest, if not direct knowledge, then affinity at the least.

For the Unanimists and the version of Cubism they were associated with, literature and painting are a means of communicating authentic experience without a detour through rationalized, conventional concepts. For Bergson himself, however, this is no easy task. What he terms intuition, the experience of the inner self and its temporality, is not amenable to representation. Indeed once representation has intervened to mediate intuition, quality is usurped by quantity and feeling by structure. Bergson sees one answer to this problem in the image, which, as a less abstract entity than the word, might be able to approximate the intimate experience of intuition. As he explains it: 'the image has at least the advantage of keeping us in the *concrete*', going on to suggest that if 'many different images' can be assembled 'as dissimilar as possible, any one of them will be prevented from usurping the place of the intuition it is instructed to call forth'.⁸⁷

The term 'concrete' that Bergson uses here and elsewhere in his work to refer to the attempt to approximate intuition echoes throughout Beckett's essay on *Proust*. Bergson's suggestion that a series of such concrete images

⁸⁵ Rudmose-Brown (1925).

⁸⁶ "Unanimism" was a reaction against the extreme detachment and egotism of Symbolism characterized by direct expression and the avoidance of symbol and allegory', Rudmose-Brown (1925), p. 153.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Antliff (1988), p. 345. My emphasis.

can be used to simulate the experience of pure duration was originally conceived, in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, in terms of poetry.⁸⁸ Something similar lies at the heart of Beckett's description of Proust's 'indirect and comparative . . . chain-figure of metaphor':

[t]he Proustian world is expressed metaphorically by the artisan because it is apprehended metaphorically by the artist: the indirect and comparative expression of indirect and comparative perception. The rhetorical equivalent of the Proustian real is the chain-figure of the metaphor.⁸⁹

This difficult passage repeats with variation an earlier one where Beckett describes 'the radiographical quality' of the narrator's observation:

The copiable he does not see. He searches for a relation, a common factor, substrata . . . his faculties are more violently activated by intermediate than by terminal – capital – stimuli. We find countless examples of these secondary reflexes. Withdrawn in his cook dark room at Combray he extracts the total essence of a scorching midday from the scarlet stellar blows of a hammer in the street . . . Thus can be explained the primacy of instinctive perception – intuition – in the Proustian world. Because instinct, when not vitiated by Habit, is also a reflex, from the Proustian point of view ideally remote and indirect, a chain-reflex.⁸³

Both passages emphasize indirection rather than direct expression or perception (compare Stephen Dedalus' ecstatic apprehension of the object, or the 'Dante..Bruno' essay's rhetoric of immediate presentation). Yet the references to reflex, stimuli and instinct suggest the return of the physiological registration of the real we explored earlier. Once again there is a tension or hesitation here. Perception is both immediate and remote. The way in which the 'chain-reflex' of the second passage is transformed into the 'chain-figure of metaphor' also conveys ambivalence. It suggests that Beckett understands Proust's prose style, and in particular his use of metaphor, as a successful translation of sense perception into language, yet it is successful precisely because the original apprehension is already metaphorical: 'expressed metaphorically by the artisan because it is apprehended metaphorically by the artist'. Indeed the examples that Beckett gives make clear that perception for Beckett is fundamentally bound up with misrecognition: 'a napkin in the dust taken for a pencil of light, the sound of water in the pipes for a dog barking or the hooting of a siren'. Here is a major step towards Beckett's aesthetic of ignorance, failure and perplexity.

⁸⁸ Antliff (1988), pp. 344–345.

⁸⁹ Beckett (1965), p. 88.

Beckett's distinction between artisan and artist is taken directly from Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, where the artist is more straightforwardly seen as creator of original metaphors that then become calcified by artisanal repetition:

In so far as we are geometricians . . . we reject the unforeseeable. We might accept it, assuredly, in so far as we are artists, for art lives on creation and implies a latent belief in the spontaneity of nature. But disinterested art is a luxury, like pure speculation. Long before being artists, we are artisans.⁹⁰

For Bergson the ideal 'disinterested art' is thus an art of the 'unforeseeable', one that emphasizes contingency. As we shall see, Beckett will ally this notion of the unforeseeable to his preoccupation with the material art surface in order to reassert the possibility of a contingent form of representation.

Near the beginning of *Dream* we find a moment where Beckett sets out the relationship between viewer and object in terms that recall both Bergson and those Cubist painters who followed him. Belacqua stands with 'his head cocked up uncomfortably at the star field, like Mr Ruskin in the Sistine' and considers what he sees. The reference to *Modern Painters* sets the tone of a passage that is as much a meditation on the image as a description of the firmament. Beckett begins by seeing the star-field as a surface where 'the passionate movements of the mind [are] charted in light and darkness. The tense passionate intelligence, when arithmetic abates.'⁹¹ Here Beckett uses a Bergsonian terminology of passion versus intelligence, one that also appears in the Trinity lectures. In addition there is that attention to the ideas of sensuous description and direct correspondence between brain and world that we have seen elsewhere. As with Cubist versions of the Bergsonian image-chain, it is in visual terms of abstract patterns of light and dark that the movement of the mind is figured. What is more there is a familiar equation of ideas of pure perception and material surface. Hence the night sky is 'now seen merely', that is to say without the conceptual being foisted upon it, and so becomes a pure plane, 'a depthless lining of hemisphere'. Finally, a direct connection with the physical support of a painting is made when the heavens are described in terms of 'the astral incoherence of the art surface'.⁹²

If Beckett often relies on such notions of the material surface taken from visual art in his evolving poetics, it is equally true that Gleizes' and

⁹⁰ Bergson (1922), p. 48.

⁹¹ Beckett (1992), p. 16.

⁹² Beckett (1992), p. 17.

Metzinger's *Cubism* does not hesitate to adopt the analogy of writing to describe the new painting's goals:

[w]e will willingly confess that it is impossible to write without employing ready-made phrases . . . It is for each to decide whether he should scatter them all through his work, mix them intimately with personal symbols, or boldly exhibit them, magical discords, shreds of the great collective lie, at a single point of the plane.⁹³

Here a case is made for the cubist technique of taking elements of traditional perspective painting – chiaroscuro, three-dimensional modelling etc. – and treating them overtly as devices by distributing them across the canvas. Beckett makes a similar point, using the same term, in *Dream* when he argues that 'the conversationalist, with his contempt of the tag and the ready-made' can't supply what he calls the 'sparkle' that can come with an original phrase because 'the lift of the high spot is precisely from the tag and the ready-made'. He then goes on to oppose 'the uniform, horizontal writing' of the man with a style to the 'perpendicular, diamante, pitted' writing of Racine.⁹⁴ As with Gleizes' use of the term 'ready-made' to suggest how clichés of illusionist painting might be mixed with personal symbols to create new perceptual experiences, so Beckett suggests with his talk of the 'perpendicular' and the 'pitted' that the text is above all a material assemblage conceived in spatial terms. In both cases, for the Cubists and for Beckett, the notion of a record of unmediated perception is in dialogue with reflection on the nature of the surface on which this perception is recorded, whether canvas and text, with this surface understood in each case in highly material if not physiological terms. Indeed for each the 'art surface' becomes an ideal elision of subject and object, a place that registers impression immediately in the way the retina supposedly does.

Returning to Belacqua's reverie beneath the 'art surface' of the heavens, we can clearly see a contrast between that surface and the perpendicular shafts that pierce it:

The ecstatic mind, the mind achieving creation, take ours for example, rises to the shaft heads of its statement, its recondite relations of emeralg, from a labour and a weariness of deep castings that brook no schema.⁹⁵

The 'deep castings' here refer to the inexpressible Bergsonian realms of intuition that can never be translated into a rigid 'schema'. And yet, having

⁹³ Gleizes and Metzinger (1913), p. 53.

⁹⁴ Beckett (1992), p. 48.

⁹⁵ Beckett (1992), p. 16.

said that, the labour of ‘the mind achieving creation’ can still produce its statement, one that is connected through those ‘shaft-heads’ to the depths of which it forms the surface. Here is that plastic ‘transformation of a creature of surface into a creature of depth’ that Beckett writes about in *Proust*. The mention of the statement’s ‘recondite relations of emerald’ meanwhile anticipates the description of the Franciabigio landscape as one from which the young man ‘has not necessarily emerged’. As with the description of the Renaissance painting, the ideal statement thus seems to be composed of an integrated, material surface even as it translates the depths of the real, the ‘substrata’ as Beckett remarks of Proust’s ‘radio-graphic’ observation. Indeed the whole section will end with Beckett speaking of the ‘ultimate mode and factor of the creative integrity’. Once again this is a phrase which echoes *Cubism*’s repeated invocations of ‘the integral realization of painting’ and ‘the integrations of the plastic consciousness’, which in turn chime with the references to the integral and the plastic in the Racine lectures and *Proust*, respectively.⁹⁶ Along with the other echoes we have traced this seems to suggest at the very least a common set of intellectual sources for the Beckett of the early 1930s and those cubists who pursued Bergsonian ideas.

We can turn now to Beckett’s treatment of the work of another painter, much later in the novel, which both confirms and challenges the importance of the Bergsonian context. Rachel Burrows summarizes Beckett’s description of the process of creation during the 1931 lectures as follows, ‘the artist is changing, the material is changing, and the moment is changing’.⁹⁷ This dynamic sense of creativity, and the focus on the relationship between artist, material and temporality, is common in Bergson’s sporadic discussions of the act of painting or writing. Indeed, for reasons that will become apparent, it would seem that Beckett has a passage from the beginning of *Creative Evolution* in mind:

The painter is before his canvas, the colours are on the palette, the model is sitting – all this we see, and also we know the painter’s style: do we foresee what will appear on the canvas? We possess the elements of the problem; we know, in an abstract way, how it will be solved, for the portrait will surely resemble the model and will surely resemble also the artist; but the concrete solution brings with it that unforeseeable nothing which is everything in a work of art. And it is this nothing that takes time. Naught as matter, it

⁹⁶ Gleizes and Metzinger (1913), p. 5, p. 22.

⁹⁷ Gontarski et al., ‘Interview with Rachel Burrows’. www.english.fsu.edu/jobs/num1112/006_BURROWS.PDF.

creates itself as form. The sprouting and flowering of this form are stretched out on an unthinkable duration which is one with their essence.⁹⁸

We should note first of all that it is the form of the painting through which Bergson sees duration, or the passage of time, assert itself. *Dream*'s first reference to Rembrandt also dwells on questions of form and in doing so seems to refer to the vegetable metaphors of the close of Bergson's passage. Thus Beckett describes the character of Lucien as follows: 'looking at his face you saw the features bloom, as in Rembrandt's portrait of his brother' and goes on to write of the same face as a 'flowering into nothingness'.⁹⁹ It is Bergson's idea of the 'unforeseeability' of the relationship between the process of painting and the form of the finished picture on which I want to concentrate, however.

As we have seen, Rachel Burrows notes three terms in French during one of the passages devoted to Bergson in her notes on Beckett's lectures: 'originalité', 'feuilleter' and 'imprévisibilité'. The final term in particular is central to *Creative Evolution*'s treatment of art. Hence Bergson, in a passage remarkable for the way it anticipates *Dream*'s repeated association of aesthetic experience with the music of Beethoven, distinguishes between two types of order, the unforeseeable and the foreseeable: 'we say of astronomical phenomena that they manifest an admirable order, meaning by this that they can be foreseen [prevoir] mathematically, and we find an order no less admirable in a symphony of Beethoven, which is genius, originality and therefore unforeseeability [l'imprévisibilité] itself'.¹⁰⁰ Here Bergson uses two of the terms – originality and unforeseeability – that appear in Beckett's lecture, which strongly suggests a familiarity with this particular passage. But an even closer connection becomes apparent when one notes, in the quotation on painting cited earlier, how Bergson asks 'do we foresee what will appear on the canvas?' and answers in the negative, for 'the concrete solution brings with it that unforeseeable nothing which is everything'. This idea of the unforeseen as the defining element in an artwork is obviously important for Beckett, as the word appears in his writing in various forms throughout the 1930s. Already in *Proust* Beckett draws on the French verb 'prevoir' when he says that his theory of the

⁹⁸ Bergson (1922), p. 374. In her interview with Gontarski et al., Burrows links Beckett's notion of creativity with Bergson: 'And then you have [referring to her lecture notes], "Le véritable artiste reste toujours à demi inconscient de lui-même (like Bergson)." The real artist must always be not fully conscious of himself. Well, that's what I said before . . . the artist doesn't fully know himself and knows that he is changing; not only changing in viewpoint but changing from moment to moment of his life, and his material cannot be put in a jelly mold . . . his material is also in constant flux.' Ibid.

⁹⁹ Beckett (1992), p. 116. ¹⁰⁰ Bergson (1922), p. 237.

Proustian image will be ‘revealed at the peak of this prevision’.¹⁰¹ In *Dream* we find the neologism ‘unprevisible’ in a passage considering the work of both Rembrandt and Beethoven: ‘And I think of the ultimately unprevisible atom threatening to come asunder, the left wing of the atom plotting without ceasing to spit in the eye of the physical statistician.’¹⁰² In *More Pricks than Kicks*, meanwhile, the term crops up again, this time describing one of Belacqua’s ‘Beethoven pauses’:

[n]ot the least charm of this pure blank movement . . . was its aptness to receive, with or without the approval of the subject, in all their integrity the faint inscriptions of the outer world. Exempt from destination, it had not to shun the unforeseen.¹⁰³

This last passage brings together many of the elements we have been tracking in this chapter. The description of Belacqua’s movement as ‘pure’, ‘blank’ and open to inscription locates it squarely in the realm of pure perception. The implication – suggested in particular by the familiar term ‘integrity’ – is that such inscriptions are unmediated, a precognitive reception of the percept. That the idea of integrity is here associated with the unforeseen mirrors Beckett’s reading of the Franciabigio portrait, where the suspension of conventional distinctions of figure and ground in a single painterly surface was linked to ideas of narrative contingency and emergence.

For Beckett as for Bergson, then, the unforeseen marks that aspect of the process of creation that is radically open and unpredictable. If we think back to the criticisms of realist characterization in *Dream* we can see that this alternative notion of temporality could not be more different from Balzac’s. Both Beckett and Bergson are concerned with the unfolding of time as an agent of difference rather than consistency, and as a consequence understand its passage as an openness to the future. Seen in these terms Beckett’s understanding of Franciabigio’s portrait as ‘prospective’, the site of ‘an unknotting that could be’ falls into line with his interest in Bergsonian unforeseeability.

There is, however, a profound departure in Beckett’s approach to the visual image as we move from the Franciabigio portrait to *Dream*’s

¹⁰¹ Beckett (1995), p. 32. ¹⁰² Beckett (1992), p. 139.

¹⁰³ Beckett (2010), p. 33. The word is significant enough for Beckett to return to it at the end of the decade in *Watt*, with a reference to ‘circumstances of an imprevisible kind’. Beckett (1998), p. 52. He also marks Stendhal’s use of the term in his copy of *Le Rouge et le Noir* and transfers these passages into the *Dream* Notebook. See Pilling (1999), pp. 127–130. Pilling dates Beckett’s re-reading of Stendhal to late 1931.

meditations on Rembrandt. In the former case, and also in the 'art-surface' section on the night-sky, there is an emphasis on integration and the integral, a vocabulary that, as we have seen, can be found in *Proust*, and in Gleizes' and Metzinger's *Cubism*. That is to say, there is a sense of a formal and material unity that is further associated with ideas of substance and the concrete. When we come to an extended description of Rembrandt's self-portrait, on the other hand, we find instead the following:

I think now of the dehiscing, the dynamic decousu, of a Rembrandt, the implication lurking behind the pictorial pretext threatening to invade pigment and oscuro; I think of the Selbstbildnis, in the toque and the golden chain, of his portrait of his brother, of the cute little Saint Matthew angel . . . in all of which canvases during lunch on many a Sunday I have discerned a disfaction, a desuni, an Ungebund, a flottement, a tremblement, a tremor a tremelo, a disaggregating, a disintegrating, an efflorescence, a breaking down and multiplication of tissue, the corrosive ground-swell of Art.¹⁰⁴

The formal and materialist aspect of the aesthetics of statement comes under a good deal of pressure here. If the statement is elsewhere seen as autonomous, integral and intensely present, there is in this passage a much stronger sense of a force outside or beyond the 'pictorial pretext' that threatens it.

Once again, as with *Proust*, the pictorial is thus opposed to something else, but here rather than the highly formal idea of the plastic in Fry's terms, or the Cubist's more Bergsonian notions of the idea, what we have is a sense of the fragility of form, its susceptibility to disintegration. Painting is no longer able to spatialize time in the way Beckett sees Franciabigio do. The list of verbs with which the Rembrandt description ends all emphasize the rupture and incapacity of design instead of its integrity. Indeed it is this 'corrosive' force itself that the narrator identifies with art. It is here perhaps that we can again see the beginnings of Beckett's aesthetics of failure, one that I suggest is in tension with and at times, as here, supplants, the aesthetics of statement throughout his oeuvre.

¹⁰⁴ Beckett (1992), p. 138. There is a clear echo here of Marcel Brion's essay in *Our Exagmination*, '[t]he painters who have attained the greatest emotional power are precisely those whose work includes time – for example, Rembrandt. While we look at it, the picture seems always in the process of "being made". It seems to be constructing itself with the moments and it seems that if we were to return on the morrow we should find it changed. And, in fact, when we return on the morrow, it is changed.' See Brion (1961), pp. 14–18, p. 15.

Amidst the parade of terms broadly suggestive of a dynamic movement in the Rembrandt passage, one stands out, being a neologism: disfaction. It is a word that can also be found three years earlier, in Beckett's short satirical dialogue, published in the Trinity College Dublin magazine *A College Miscellany*, entitled 'Che Sciagura', where one character complains of suffering from a 'disfaction complex'.¹⁰⁵ Disfaction, I suggest, is Beckett's translation of the Italian *disfazione*, which he also uses in *Proust* and that then appears later in *Three Dialogues*, where it is identified as coming from Leonardo's *Notebooks*.¹⁰⁶ It also appears in 'Le Monde et le Pantalon' in French translation as *malfaçon*.¹⁰⁷ The fact that the term appears in several texts over such a long period of time suggests the importance that Beckett attaches to it. *Disfazione* comes from *facere*, to make and is related to *disfactio*, or mutilation. We might think of such possible English translations as unmaking, or mismaking, and this is congruent with the other terms with which it is associated in *Dream*'s description of the Rembrandt self-portrait, though it is usually translated as 'destruction'. One section where the term appears in Leonardo's *Notebooks* as the kind of general principle that Beckett's use of it in *Proust* and *Three Dialogues* implies is s. 1162, under the heading 'Morals: What is Life'.

Behold the hope and the desire of going back to one's country and of returning to the primal state of chaos is like that of the moth to the light, and of the man who with perpetual longing looks forward with joy to each new spring and to each new summer, and to the new months and the new years, deeming that the things he longs for are too slow in coming; and he does not perceive that he is longing for his own destruction [*disfazione*]. But this longing is in its quintessence, the spirit of the elements, which finding itself imprisoned as the soul within the human body is ever longing to return to its sender; and I would have you know that this same longing is that quintessence inherent in nature, and that man is a type of the world.¹⁰⁸

Thus for Leonardo *disfazione* is a component of a force of transformation and change, but crucially for our purposes it is not one that is essentially generative, but is associated rather with oblivion and death; it 'speeds in fury to its undoing'.¹⁰⁹ That is to say, as much as Beckett is attracted to the Bergsonian idea of creation as so innately unpredictable that one cannot

¹⁰⁵ Anon. (1929), p. 42. ¹⁰⁶ Beckett (1965), p. 31, p. 112. ¹⁰⁷ Beckett (1983), p. 122.

¹⁰⁸ da Vinci (2008), p. 259. For a transcription of the original; Italian see Fabio Frosini, "Il lessico filosofico di Leonardo in tre stazioni dello 'spirito'" in Carlo Vecce (ed.), *I mondi di Leonardo. Arte, Scienza e Filosofia* (Milano: IULM edizioni Università Milano, 2003), p. 87. Many thanks to Antonio Gambacorta for help with this.

¹⁰⁹ da Vinci (2008), p. 101.

‘foresee and calculate . . . its least vicissitude’ as *Dream* puts it, he has at the same time a conception of that process as entropic rather than generative.¹¹⁰ Bergson’s joyful investment in duration is thus countered in *Dream* by the implication that the ‘ground swell of art’ is ‘corrosive’, more akin to a death-drive than a creative evolution. Indeed if Beckett was looking for a concept assimilable to a Bergsonian sense of process which nevertheless endowed it with a charge of chaos and disorder, disaffection seems ideal. Beckett’s inclusion of the term in his description of Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait* suggests that the experience communicated by the painting is not the positively charged creative evolution of Bergson, and certainly not the ecstatic mutuality of Unanimism or Gleizes and Metzinger. Rather it is a Schopenhauerean death-drive. Once again we can see here an early sign of the way Beckett is moving beyond the modernist contexts that frame his earliest engagements with painting and the image, and introducing elements that will come to define his own work. We will trace another step in this process in [Chapter 2](#), though we will trace its origins not in intellectual and artistic contexts but in social and political ones.

¹¹⁰ Beckett (1993), p. 119.

The Politics of the Image
Dublin, Paris, London 1931–1936

From early texts like the poems of *Echo's Bones* to late work like the TV play *Nacht und Träume*, Samuel Beckett's writing plays close attention to religious painting. In doing so he reflects a widespread interest in that tradition that marks the visual culture of the 1920s and 1930s, as all across Europe painters moved away from abstraction. For many the religious painting of the past formed a resource which could be exploited to pursue new forms of figuration in the wake of Cubism's demise.¹ Nowhere was this truer than in Germany, where the great traditions of medieval painting, of Dürer and Grünewald, and their associated techniques assumed immense importance. And yet the forms and methods of medieval painting were put to very different purposes in the Germany of the period, reflecting the charged political atmosphere of the times. That is to say, if religious painting is referred to it is often in the service of an art that is resolutely materialist and socially engaged. This is the context in which I want to begin, by looking at the use of painting in one of Beckett's early poems.

'Casket of Pralinen for the Daughter of a Dissipated Mandarin' was published in *The European Caravan* in 1931 and so predates the completion of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, although it alludes to Ewald Dülberg's *Abendmahl* (Last Supper), a painting the novel dwells on at some length.² At one point in *Dream* the narrator memorably evokes a 'creedless, colourless, sexless Christ' and one of the attractions of *Abendmahl* for Beckett is its negation of such an idealized, transcendental image (although as we saw with 'Alba' elsewhere the narrator is moved by such blank images).³ Certainly this would seem to be the import of the poem's reference to Dülberg's 'radiant lemon-whiskered Christ' and his 'blood-faced Tom' (i.e. St. Thomas): it is the intense, sensuous, non-naturalistic

¹ See Rewald (2006).

² Beckett (1992), pp. 77–80.

³ Beckett (1992), p. 35.

use of colour that Beckett responds to.⁴ There is also a general emphasis on the bodily appetites at work in the scene, both gustatory and erotic. In Beckett's interpretation, Dülberg relocates the Last Supper to a Parisian bar, and the poem as a whole is unremitting in its evocation of the consumption and expulsion of food, drink, tears and spittle. Even when a voice commands the poet to reach for a more exalted register, and treat of a capitalized, ideal 'Beauty', the bodily mechanics of such a process are comically laid bare: 'Now me boy/take a hitch in your lyrical loinstring'.

Such ironic tactics are all too common in the poem, and yet there are moments when the force of a particular utterance cannot quite be defused by its deflationary coda. Take the following for example:

oh I am ashamed
of all clumsy artistry
i am ashamed of presuming
to arrange words
of everything but the ingenuous fibres
that suffer honestly.
fool! Do you hope to untangle
the knot of God's pain?

melancholy Christ that was a soft one!

The desire here to have done with representation in favour of the truth of the body, the materiality of the 'ingenuous fibres' of the physical world, is announced only to be dismissed. Yet notwithstanding the coy self-criticism of the final line quoted, the idea of the 'knot of God's pain' goes to the heart of this poem, and to much of Beckett's writing in the period. It is precisely the impossibility of untangling the ideal from the material, of separating the human, suffering Christ from the divine Father, that haunts the poem and constitutes an important contradiction within it. Beckett takes this age-old theological problem and uses it to investigate some very modern aesthetic concerns, not least the tension between sensation and concept, the real and the unreal, that has been so central to our account thus far. It is worth noting that one can trace a similar trajectory in Thomas MacGreevy's work, though here there is a much stronger sense of an accommodation between the material and the ideal, as in his comment of Giorgione's painting that 'dream and imagination . . . the transcendent and the immanent, seemed in perfect fidelity'.⁵ As we have seen, Beckett has no truck with such complacency.

⁴ Beckett (2012), pp. 235–237.

⁵ See McGreevy (1991), p. 153.

In what follows I want to pursue one particular strand of the poem's concern with the problem of materiality: its engagement with historical violence. The allusion to Dülberg's painting is quickly superseded, when the voice of the poem changes to a headline-like imitation of an English accent (reminiscent of Eliot's use of capitals in *The Waste Land*), saying that the last supper would have been:

THE BULLIEST FEED IN 'ISTORY

If the boy scouts hadn't booked a trough
For the eleventh's eleventh eleven years after.

The reference in the final line is to a party marking the anniversary of the armistice between Britain and Germany in 1918. By comparing the last supper to a lavish commemoration of the horror of the Western Front, Beckett is again insisting, hyperbolically, on the earthly (and indeed 'istorical) aspects of the former. Importantly, the 'trough' mentioned here is picked up again in the valediction of the poem's closing stanza: 'Though the swine were slaughtered/beneath the waves/not far from the firm sand/they're gone they're gone.' Despite the fact that the immediate allusion is to the parable of the Gadarene swine, the incongruous verb 'slaughtered' sends us back to the earlier reference to the mechanized death of World War I. Indeed this association of the Biblical parable with the war has a precedent in D. H. Lawrence's reference in correspondence to 'the Gadarene slope of the war'.⁶ It is this mingling of the poem's religious images with an anti-Imperialist account of recent history that will be our concern.

The end of the poem turns to another religious painting, Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*. Although the text again emphasizes the physicality of the chosen image, it concentrates on the way this physicality actively impedes the contemporary viewer's ability to see Jesus as divine, but rather insists on him as a mortal man

now who'll discover in Mantegna's
butchery stout foreshortened saviour
recognitions of transcendent
horse-power?

A later, unpublished, draft of the poem is more complex and ambivalent, but still clearly concerned with the relationship between materialist presentation and idealizing reading. Significantly this draft, like the published

⁶ Lawrence (2000), p. 102.

version, attributes to Wordsworth the role, in the past, of sponsoring the ideas of immortality and transcendence that the poem critiques:

Albion Albion mourn for him mourn
Mourn I mean for William Wordsworth
For who is there now to discern in Mantegna's
Foreshortened butchers of salvation
Recognition of transcendent might and right.

The temporal marker 'now' in both versions picks up on the earlier references that indicate a setting in the aftermath of World War I. The suggestion seems to be that where Mantegna's revolutionary naturalism, his image of Christ as mortified and heavy with death, might once have been recruited to some notion of a supernaturally justified power, that moment is now past.

Significant too is the way in which the revision of the line 'butchery stout foreshortened Saviour' to 'foreshortened butchers of Salvation' transfers the emphasis from Christ's body to the act of looking. That is to say the adjective 'butchery' describing the thickened, stolid slab of flesh is replaced by the Cockney rhyming slang of 'butcher's (hook)' (i.e. 'look'), to mark the way the viewer's gaze is overtly and dramatically manipulated by Mantegna. There are further traces of English slang in the poem, alongside the references to war and Imperialism mentioned earlier, which support this reading of the revision. The choice of Mantegna as painter is also apt in that his work is often associated with another Imperium, that of ancient Rome, viz. his enormous *Triumph of Caesar*, which Beckett would later see at Hampton Court.

For now, however, I want to stress the way the relationship between the two drafts of the line demonstrates Beckett's attentiveness to the movement between the material and the ideal in painting. For where the first version of the 'butchers' line locates the distinction of the painting in its revolutionary realism, the second version defines it as being primarily about the formal manipulation of the gaze to inculcate the idea of transcendence. The difference between the two versions clearly demonstrates an increasing sensitivity to the way in which the painting's radical naturalism – in particular the unprecedented foreshortening – is still in the service of an attempt to insist on the abstract idea of Salvation. And yet, having said that, the import of the poem is that now, in the aftermath of the War, such devices are no longer effective.

Beckett goes on to translate the theological purpose of the image into the more clearly historical and political terms of a justification of

‘transcendent horse-power’ in the first draft or, alternatively, ‘transcendent might and right’ in the second. Both versions appeal to ‘Albion’ to mourn for Wordsworth, implicating a version of national pastoral in this process. Hence the first draft sees Wordsworth pressed into ideological service as a ‘son of the soil’, while in the second he is a ‘landscape gardener’, an early suggestion that Beckett is alive to the politicization of landscape and landscape painting that was rife in Britain, France and Ireland in the 1930s.

What the poem seems to be engaging in, then, is what would now go by the name of ideological critique, an exposure of the way in which art (realism in particular) is implicated in the machinations of power and subject-formation. Such critical tactics are of course familiar to us today (indeed over-familiar). But this is 1931, and what we know of Beckett’s reading in the period does not provide us with convincing sources for this relatively novel way of thinking about aesthetics. I now want to suggest one possible transnational context for such thinking, a context reflected, as we shall see, not only in the content of the poem, but in the material circumstances in which it was both composed and, at least initially, read.

Questions of the ideology of the image are rarely overtly engaged with in critical accounts of Beckett’s work, yet his friend and tutor Rudmose-Brown described his student as an ‘anti-Imperialist’. Knowlson persuasively attributes this to the former’s own influence, but another candidate would be Beckett’s uncle, William ‘Boss’ Sinclair. As his brother Harry pointed out, in the obituary he wrote for *The Irish Times*, Sinclair was heavily involved in the Irish Revolution of 1916 and the subsequent War of Independence: ‘intensely interested in the Republican movement, a friend of both Griffiths and Collins, [he] took part behind the scenes in many a vital and difficult affair.’⁷ This is corroborated by Maurice Goldring’s *Odd Man Out*, where, in his account of his own time in Dublin, the radical journalist reports that Sinclair ‘grew a beard, took to politics and left the business’ that he ran with Harry.⁸

It was Sinclair’s relationship with radical Republicanism that was the main reason for the extraordinary move whereby he uprooted his family and moved to Kassel, Germany, in 1922. In James and Elizabeth Knowlson’s *Beckett Remembering/Remembering Beckett*, Beckett says:

⁷ A Correspondent (1937), p. 10.

⁸ Goldring (1935), p. 181.

[m]y aunt Cissie was the only daughter. She married a Jew called William Sinclair. They had a shop in Dublin. Cissie was musical. But she had a very difficult time with her husband. He had some political troubles in Dublin and had to leave. That's why he choose Kassell . . . There was a friend of his there: the poet [and painter] Cecil Salkeld. He was there. That's why he choose Kassell. I met him [Salkeld] when I was there.⁹

The obvious interpretation of this account is that Sinclair had fallen foul of the Free State government that emerged after the Civil War: the date of departure of 1922 coincides with the onset of the new administration, and the atmosphere of intense bitterness and recrimination after the intimate violence of the conflict, when executions were carried out by both sides.

Sinclair's choice of Kassell in Northern Germany was dictated by the presence there of Cecil Salkeld, another dissident, much younger than himself, who had also fought in the war of Independence.¹⁰ As pointed out by Beckett, Salkeld was studying at the Kunstakademie in Kassell under Ewald Dülberg, who Beckett would later meet and whose painting, as we have seen, figures in *Dream*. By all accounts Salkeld throws himself into the febrile world of the 1920s German avant-garde. In Kassell he encountered the painting of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, with its 'severe stylization, sharp forms and emphasis on a flattened picture plane'.¹¹ An emphasis on line, form and flatness would remain characteristic of his whole oeuvre. Beckett himself will always be attracted to such an aesthetic.

According to S. B. Kennedy, in May 1922 Salkeld joined the Union of Progressive International Artists in Dusseldorf. This must be a reference to the important Congress which took place on that date, when artists from various avant-garde groups across Germany and France debated the relations between art and politics. Delegates included Raoul Haussman, Theo van Doesburg, representing *De Stijl*, the Russian Constructivist El Lizzitsky in his capacity as editor of the journal *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* and Hans Richter.¹² Intriguingly Otto Freundlich and Jankel Adler were also in attendance, as members of the radical Berlin group around the communist journal *Die Aktion*.¹³ Beckett would become close to both artists in the late 1930s. Salkeld shortly afterwards exhibited with the Young Rhineland Circle of Painters, to which Adler and Otto Dix were affiliated. He was thus aligning himself with the radical leftist, anarchist and pacifist elements of the German art world. This is precisely the terrain

⁹ Knowlson and Knowlson (2006), p. 35.

¹⁰ See C. S. Andrews' account of sharing a cell with Salkeld in Andrews (1979), p. 137.

¹¹ See Kennedy (2004), pp. 90–95, p. 93. ¹² See *De Stijl* (1974), pp. 58–68. ¹³ *Ibid.*

of the historical avant-garde, where, as Andreas Huyssen puts it, ‘the early modernist autonomy aesthetic [clashes] with the revolutionary politics arising in Russia and Germany out of WWI’.¹⁴ The traces of a similar clash can be glimpsed, in much more rarefied ways, in Beckett’s aesthetic thought of the first half of the 1930s.

Salkeld divided his time between Germany and Ireland till late 1925, when he settled in Dublin, although if Beckett, as he states in the interview with Knowlson, met him in Germany he must still have been going there at the end of the decade. In Dublin, Salkeld again became active in avant-garde circles. Alongside Beckett’s future university friend Con Leventhal, he set up the radical little magazine *To-Morrow* in 1924. Here he published his two part essay ‘The Principle of Painting’ written while he was still in Kassell.¹⁵ In this little manifesto Salkeld articulates an aesthetic that is clearly congruent with the kind of New Objectivity that was so influential in Germany and to which Dülberg had introduced him.

While Deirdre Bair argues that Sinclair chose Germany as his bolt-hole in order to import antiques back to Ireland, the attractions of Salkeld’s links with the left-wing avant-garde must surely have appealed to him.¹⁶ For Sinclair, like Salkeld, held politics and painting to be inextricable. This is immediately apparent from his essay ‘Painting’, which appeared in the *Irish Review* in 1912 and was later published in book form.¹⁷ *The Irish Review*, short-lived but influential, was edited by Joseph Mary Plunkett – who would be executed for his part in the 1916 Rising – and Patrick Colum. Leading figures from all factions of the Irish cultural and political ferment of the early century can be found in its pages, including W. B. Yeats, A. E., Standish O’Grady, Thomas MacDonagh, Arthur Griffiths, Roger Casement and Daniel Corkery. Sinclair appears first with an account of an exhibition at the Hibernian Academy in 1912, the most important body for the promotion of the visual arts in Ireland, and very much an establishment organization.

The review takes issue with the exhibition’s salon hang, criticizing it in a way that suggests a preference for the more avant-garde curatorial fashion of widely-spaced paintings in a single line. More radically, Sinclair argues that the ‘Academy . . . leaves one bored and tired, vainly trying to find a reason for its existence’.¹⁸ This is of a piece with the general tenor of an essay that, while starting rather lyrically, builds to a corrosive critique

¹⁴ Huyssen (1987), p. vii. ¹⁵ Salkeld (1924), p. 3 and cont. in No. 2 (September 1924), p. 5.

¹⁶ Bair (1978), p. 59. ¹⁷ Sinclair (1912), pp. 180–185; Sinclair (1918).

¹⁸ Sinclair (1912), p. 183.

of the malign influence of academicism in the Irish visual arts. In the process Sinclair makes a clear equation between traditional aesthetics, aristocracy and the market on the one hand and the avant-garde of the 'vital now' on the other, in terms that are intriguing enough to deserve quoting at length:

today many painters ... are prepared to throw in their lot with sheer ugliness rather than allow the ancient past to direct the vital now. The post-impressionists and the futurists are to be welcomed if not for their importance at least for what they affirm, that it is the right of the individual to assert his own expression in his own age and out of his own environment, a right which has long been denied by the aristocrats of the past, who still persist in viewing the present in the eyes of the past. Not that one has anything but reverence and appreciation for the great painters of the past, but when they are dethroned from their high palaces and made sterile to do duty in the market-place for the benefit of bolstering useless if not harmful institutions to the detriment of painters of power and vitality it is high time for Picasso or Cézanne, Severini or Boccioni to hold a revolt against the tyranny of tradition.¹⁹

The Hibernian Academy is targeted in the essay as 'a useless if not harmful institution'. Indeed the whole concept of the art institution and its relationship with creativity is subjected to scrutiny, with the Academy being seen as innately conservative, complicit with the market and interested only in its own perpetuation. What is particularly striking about Sinclair's treatment of aesthetics, however, is that, while there is clearly a cultural politics at work, it is not a cultural-nationalist politics. That is to say, in a journal in which Padraic Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh and others were arguing that art and culture had a political role to play in the formation and maintenance of oppositional movements, Sinclair is at once more specially concerned with the history of aesthetics itself, and at the same time with much more radical, universalizing ideas. Hence the essay ends,

[t]he stars do not speak, nor does the moon deliver sermons. And when the pressing problems of the soul and body, male and female, capital and labour are all solved, painting will assert itself as the sun-born art – the Joyous One – the praise of perfection.²⁰

This combination of Marxist terminology and reference to the gender question in the context of a defence of Picasso and Futurism places Sinclair in an ideological position long occluded by the conservatism of the new

¹⁹ Sinclair (1912), p. 184.

²⁰ Sinclair (1912), p. 185.

Irish State. Indeed in its attack on the Academy it conforms exactly to definitions of the early twentieth-avant-garde advanced by Peter Burger and others.²¹ Sinclair's *Painting* clearly equates political radicalism with avant-garde aesthetics, and in doing so alerts us to an important and overlooked Irish context for Beckett's own early work.

Nicholas Allen has recently argued that the ferment of ideas represented by magazines such as *The Irish Review* continued well into the 1920s and 1930s. Thus he writes of a 'subterranean Dublin where writers, actors, musicians and politicians mingled in the margins. They experimented in forms of burlesque and low comedy, pamphlets and periodicals, the erotic and irreverent – all expressions of a society newly mutable.'²² When Allen describes the positions of some of those involved as combining 'the iconoclasm of continental modernism with pointed antagonism to Imperialism', he could be describing Sinclair's essay.

It could equally be describing what we have seen of the tactics and content of Beckett's 'Casket of Pralinen'. And this is no surprise, for what is striking about the radical Dublin underground of the time is just how many of Beckett's close friends and acquaintances were involved. Thomas McGreevy and A. J. Leventhal, for example, set up the modernist review *The Klaxon* in 1924, its editorial advocating 'a whiff of Dadaist Europe to kick Ireland into artistic wakefulness', and as we have seen, Cecil Salkeld along with Leventhal and Francis Stuart were behind the equally avant-garde *Tomorrow* later the same year.²³ Other friends like Estella Solomons, Jack B. Yeats, Percy Ussher and Mary Manning were also able to occupy positions in a mutable social space that appears to have been hospitable to a very wide spectrum of dissent from the increasingly assertive Catholic nationalism of the new state.

Allen's *Ireland, Modernism and the Civil War* draws particular attention to a small but lively demi-monde of experimental theatre, performance and cabaret that was oppositional in both its aesthetics and its politics. It is thus intriguing that Bair describes how in 1926 Beckett 'became a regular customer at Madame Cogley's cabaret' alongside 'Liam O'Flaherty, F. R. Higgins and Austin Clarke'.²⁴ Madame 'Toto' Cogley was the pseudonym of Helen Carter, who would later be a director of the Gate Theatre. Her cabaret, also known as 'The Little Theatre' took place

²¹ See Bürger (1984). This book has its critics of course, most recently Marjorie Perloff and Hal Foster. However, as we shall see, Burger's definition of the historical avant-garde as engaged in an institutional critique which attempts to break down the border between art and life exactly describes Sinclair's position.

²² Allen (2009), p. 54. ²³ Emery (1923–1924), p. 1. ²⁴ Allen (2009), p. 48.

on Saturday nights in South William Street. Relying on memoirs of the period by Rosamund Jacobs amongst others, Allen argues that Cogley's cabaret was a key node in a network connecting political activists, the avant-garde and a youthful Bohemia. Radical left-wing painters such as Harry Kernoff and Norah McGuinness were involved, creating stage-sets for the highly political German theatre that was a feature of the small theatres at the time.²⁵

We know that Beckett moved on the fringes of two acting troupes in the period. One of these, 'The Dramiks' was a sub-set of the Dublin Drama League who, according to Clarke and Ferrar, 'presented material informally during the at-homes for the League's consideration' at the experimentally inclined Peacock Theatre.²⁶ Bair says they were 'especially interested in German Expressionism, and performed plays by Toller, Werfel, Wedekind and others'.²⁷ This accords with Elaine Sisson's claim that the Dramiks were 'a 1925 off-shoot of the Dublin Drama League for players who had a specific interest in radically avant-garde plays'.²⁸ Indeed it was German leftist drama that enabled both the Peacock and the Gate theatres to establish their distance from the state-sanctioned aesthetic of the Abbey theatre. My wager here is that in a similar way Salkeld, Sinclair and other radicals, including Jack B. Yeats, looked to German painting as an alternative to the officially approved naturalist aesthetic of the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art under Seán Keating. This is the context in which the combination of anti-Imperialism, ideological critique and ekphrasis in 'Casket of Pralinen' might be read. That is to say, the poem attests to Beckett's intimacy with a highly politicized, transnational avant-gardism. There is, however, an important qualification to be made to any such reading, one that suggests Beckett's simultaneous distance from this milieu, and that can be illuminated through recourse to another text by William Sinclair.

In 1933 William Sinclair arrived back in Dublin from Germany, and the institutional critique of his earlier essay on painting returned in a less strident, more ironic form, in the shape of the lecture on German art that he delivered to the Society of Dublin Painters at 7 Stephen's Green.²⁹ Here again there is a strong sense of that performative quality that Allen

²⁵ See Sissons (2010), pp. 132–148. See also O'Connor (2012). Kernoff went to Moscow in 1931 with 'The Friends of Soviet Russia' and is thus more than likely the model for the 'communist decorator' that attends the Frick's party in *Dream* and *More Pricks than Kicks* 'who is just back from the Moscow Reserves'. See Beckett (1992), p. 219.

²⁶ Clarke and Ferrar (1979), p. 14.

²⁷ Bair (1978), p. 236.

²⁸ Sissons (2010), p. 146, n. 5.

²⁹ See UoR JEK A/2/274.

attributes to the Dublin avant-garde underworld of the period. Sinclair's story about wandering along the hills above Howth, looking for a place to think on his chosen topic, is itself a wandering, fractal narrative, though one with flashes of more serious intent. In various asides Sinclair criticizes the new Irish state, noting the litter at his feet, the new municipal housing he sees and, in repeated references to the 'Irish tobacco' he is smoking, the economic protectionism that de Valera's new administration had recently implemented, one example of which was the stipulation that all cigarettes should contain a percentage of home-grown. After much further humorous and sardonic digression Sinclair recounts stripping naked the better to contemplate matters aesthetic. At last he finally accepts that he should actually impart some information about German art to his audience. This turns out to be the way in which in Germany, 'I never saw a picture, old or modern, with glass on it', a fact about which he has very strong opinions:

Have you not all experienced the eye-squint torture . . . the bumping into somebody else in your effort to see the picture, only to find that no matter what you do you cannot see the picture. You can't see all of it at once.³⁰

In complaining about the practice of displaying pictures behind glass Sinclair once again conforms to avant-garde attitudes. In 1924 Mina Loy had complained that although 'the flux of life is pouring its aesthetic attitude into your eyes, your ears . . . you ignore it because you are looking for your canons of beauty in some sort of frame or glass case of tradition'.³¹ For Ezra Pound in his 1920 essay 'The Curse', meanwhile, aesthetic experience has 'leaked away into . . . the plate-glass cabinet in the drawing room'.³² Both poets see the glass case in classic avant-garde terms as an artificial barrier that sequesters art from life, inhibiting the revolutionary possibilities of the work. Crucially, however, Sinclair's criticism of exhibition practice in Ireland takes a distinctively local turn when he argues that to encase the picture in glass is to 'put a uniform on the picture just as if they were policemen and soldiers'. The significance of this becomes clearer when he then alludes to the G. K. Chesterton 'Father Brown' story 'The Invisible Man' – where a murderer famously eludes suspicion because he is a postman – and adds 'murderers can wear uniforms too'.³³

Here the performative, knockabout quality of the lecture suddenly shifts into something much more risky, in an Ireland where the executions of the Civil War are still a live issue. For Sinclair is very clearly alluding to the

³⁰ *Ibid.* ³¹ See Siraganian (2012), pp. 80–81.

³² Siraganian (2012), p. 81.

³³ See UoR JEK A/2/274.

well-known incident that took place in April 1931, at a performance of Denis Johnson's *The Moon in the Yellow River*. In the course of that play, a character is shot by state forces while attempting to blow up a new power plant, and it was famously objected by Free State supporters that it was a scandal 'for a man wearing a national uniform to commit a murder on the stage'. As Michael Rubenstein points out, it was widely assumed at the time that the controversial target of the play and the force behind the reaction to it was Kevin O'Higgins, the Justice Minister who authorized the executions of seventy-seven Republican prisoners between 1923 and 1924.³⁴ Sinclair, himself a Republican just returned from exile in Germany, thus seems to be settling an old score.

Beckett himself cannot easily be assigned to such defined political positions. On the contrary, the position he saw himself adopt at the time was that of 'the quietism of the sparrow alone upon the house-top'.³⁵ And yet Sinclair's concerns do crop up in his work in a manner that illuminates his complex modes of adopting and adapting aspects of the intellectual climate in which he found himself. Thus in 'Love and Lethe', from *More Pricks than Kicks*, referring to 'the Magdalene in the Perugino Pietà in the National Gallery of Dublin', Beckett adds the following footnote,

[t]his figure, owing to the glittering vitrine behind which the canvas cowers, can only be apprehended in sections. Patience, however, and a retentive memory have been known to elicit a total statement approximating to the intention of the painter.³⁶

In December 1931 Beckett had already complained about the 'thick shop-glass window' covering the Irish National Gallery's Perugino, 'so that one is obliged to take cognizance of it progressively, square inch by square inch'.³⁷ The description in *More Pricks than Kicks* seems to pick up on the assertion in *Proust* that 'all that is realized in time . . . whether in Art or Life, can only be possessed successively, by a series of partial annexations'.³⁸ Beckett takes advantage of the question of the 'vitrine' to pursue philosophical and aesthetic issues that had been troubling him for some years: the limits of 'apprehension' (the term that appears in 'Dante. . . Bruno. Vico. Joyce', *Proust* and now *More Pricks than Kicks*), the cubist method of the fragmentation of the art surface, and most especially

³⁴ Rubenstein (2010), p. 159.

³⁵ Letter to MacGreevy, 10 March 1935, *LSBI*, pp. 256–264, p. 257.

³⁶ 'Love and Lethe' in Beckett (2010), pp. 77–92, p. 81, n. 1.

³⁷ Letter to MacGreevy, 20 December 1931, *LSBI*, pp. 99–102, p. 100.

³⁸ Beckett (1965), pp. 17–18.

the question of temporality and its relation to what he calls here the ‘total statement’ of the art object. The same intrusive element that incites Sinclair to political polemic results, for Beckett, in reflection on aesthetic problems. Beckett’s description of the partial annexation of the canvas, square inch by square inch, inscribes temporality into the art object, as surely as Gleizes and Metzinger did, in their Bergsonian hope that the beholder could elicit something approximate to the *experience* of the painter. Beckett, significantly enough, talks instead of the successful reconstruction of the *intentions* of the painter and the production of a ‘total statement’. On the one hand, then, Beckett describes an immanent process, proceeding through the painting, experiencing it plastically in the way he reads Proust’s work. Yet this is recuperated by the hope of the total statement, a phrase that betrays a renewal of the counter-tendency in Beckett’s aesthetics, seen in ‘Alba’, away from process and performance, towards an integrity and an autonomy that withdraws from history and time. The institution’s ‘glittering vitrine’ ironically sponsors a mode of reading that introduces temporality, yet, in a further turn of the dialectical screw, Beckett’s promise of totality countermands the avant-garde ideas that animate his Uncle’s complaint, constructing a new formal frame around the image.

But history and ideology are not so easily evaded. Let’s compare the Pietà scene with another example of what we could call failed, or failing, ekphrasis towards the end of *Murphy*, where a religious painting is evoked in the course of a similar experience of fragmentation. After his confrontation with Mr Endon, Murphy stumbles out into the night, and tries ‘to get a picture of Celia. In vain.’ This failure is then repeated on an increasingly grand scale: ‘He could not get a picture in his mind of any creature he had met, animal or human. Scraps of bodies, of landscapes, hands, eyes, lines and colours evoking nothing, rose and climbed out of sight above him.’³⁹ The one image that he does grasp in the course of this chaos, apart from ‘eyeballs being scraped’, is Bellini’s *The Circumcision* (now attributed to Bellini’s workshop), which Beckett would have seen hanging in the National Gallery in London in the mid-1930s, while writing *Murphy*. And yet this image of castrating authority simply surfaces and disappears, doing nothing to arrest or organize the turmoil.

The second scene in the woods contrasts with the first in the Gallery. *More Pricks than Kicks* envisages an active subject, able to respond and formally grasp an image, achieving a successful aesthetic judgement, while that from *Murphy* is closer to the description of Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait*

³⁹ Beckett (1993), p. 141.

in *Dream*, where form is depicted in complete crisis. Another connection resides in the way that in each case it is a religious painting that is the focus, rendering these two moments part of a sequence that extends back to the Mantegna in 'Casket of Pralinen'. However, the link between these three pictures goes deeper than their shared status as sacred images. As with Mantegna's *Lamentation*, in the Perugino the humanity of Christ is foregrounded through reference to his sexuality, and in both cases Beckett draws attention to this. First, in 'Casket', he makes reference to Christ's 'codpiece', and second in the December 1931 letter to McGreevy (after the complaint about the painting's 'formidable barrage of glass') he describes Perugino's Pietà as depicting 'a lovely cheery Xist full of sperm, & the woman touching his thighs and mourning his jewels'.⁴⁰ The reference to sexuality in the Bellini is obvious enough to need no gloss.

As Leo Steinberg points out in his celebrated and controversial 1983 survey *The Sexuality of Christ*, the eroticization of Christ's dead body is a very common theme in Renaissance religious painting, and the placing of hands, either Christ's own or another's, on his groin a particularly frequent manifestation of this.⁴¹ What is more, as Steinberg also insists, the popular subject of the infant Christ's circumcision is an iteration of the same theme, one that is often interpreted as an anticipation of the Passion and crucifixion. In each case the intended effect is that Christ's humanity and physicality is emphasized. That is to say, Steinberg reads the radical naturalism of Renaissance art as a device, deployed in order to stress the incarnational quality of Christ and reinforce his position as guarantor of the contract between God and Man.

This seems close to Beckett's position in 'Casket': the radical aesthetic departures of Renaissance humanism mask their service of power. However, where 'Casket' limits itself to the suggestion that such an aesthetic ideology is no longer effective, the passages we have been considering in *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Murphy* indicate two antithetical pathways beyond this position that repress the question of power in favour of purely aesthetic concerns. In the 'Love and Lethe' description of the Pietà we have a systematized approach that reads the great masters anew to achieve a totality, while on the other hand Murphy encounters only a terrifying chaos of 'landscape, hands, eyes, lines and colours evoking nothing'. Statement and chaos, meaning and its annihilation: these two paths will eventually come together in *Watt* as the two aspects of the 'incidents of great formal brilliance and indeterminable purport' with which the main

⁴⁰ Letter to MacGreevy, 20 December 1931, *LSBI*, pp. 99–102, p. 100.

⁴¹ Steinberg (1983).

character is continually beset at Mr Knott's house.⁴² Indeed *Watt* might be described as the novel where Beckett finally finds a way of achieving the balance between these two elements. We will return to these questions in [Chapter 5](#).

Although, as suggested earlier, there is a departure from Sinclair's overt avant-garde radicalism in the evolution of Beckett's aesthetic, history and ideology continue to play a role in the nature and context of the images that goad him to thought. This should come as no surprise: Ireland's newly theocratic state must have had a bearing on Beckett's repeated choice of religious painting as a means with which to pursue questions of the production and reception of art. The importance of religious imagery in the discourse of painting in the period can be illustrated by MacGreevy's 1949 survey *Fifty Years of Irish Painting*, which pays close attention to the 1920s. Here he notes the significance of the murals of Francis O'Donoghue at Loughrea Cathedral and at the Church of the Three Patrons, Rathgar, as well as Seán Keating's *Stations of the Cross* for Clongowes Wood College (c.1920). MacGreevy also singled out Patrick Tuohy's *Baptism in the Jordan* (1924) and Maurice McGonigal's *Crucifixion*. Referring to Keating's 1920 paintings, MacGreevy says that they 'probably mark the turning point in religious painting in Ireland, for, ever since, more and more of our painters have felt encouraged to give time or thought to the production of religious art'.⁴³ MacGreevy doesn't mention that this moment also marks the foundation of the new State, with its close connections between politics and the Catholic church. It was a coincidence that did not escape Beckett, however, who in the 1930s so often sees religious painting in terms of temporal authority rather than spiritual exaltation.

Earlier we saw William Sinclair's antipathy towards the institutions of Irish painting, and this is also apparent in Beckett's attitudes to both the Hibernian Academy and the Metropolitan School of Art. Throughout the 1930s he can rarely bring himself to say anything positive about the former's annual exhibition: 'I went to the Academy. Literally nothing there' is a typical comment from 1933, while again in 1937 he thought that 'the Academy was incredibly awful'.⁴⁴ When it came to the main representatives of the Metropolitan School, he was equally sour: 'I thought Orpen's Parmigian and Wash House nearly as bad as Keating', Beckett

⁴² Beckett (1998), p. 71. ⁴³ MacGreevy (1949), pp. 97–512.

⁴⁴ Letter to MacGreevy, 13 May 1933, *LSBr*, pp. 156–164, p. 159; Letter to MacGreevy, 14 May 1937, *LSBr*, pp. 494–500, p. 497.

writes, after a visit to the National Gallery in December 1931.⁴⁵ William Orpen was massively influential through his sporadic teaching at the School in the early part of the century, and Keating, who succeeded him, was profoundly influenced by Orpen's distinctive realist style. Beckett initially seems slightly better disposed towards Keating's own successor, Maurice McGonigal. The following comments come in the course of a well-known letter, to which we will be returning, in which Beckett discusses the deficiencies of traditional landscape painting:

[s]o the problem (as it would seem to preoccupy perhaps the least stultified of the younger Dublin decorators, viz. McGonagall [sic]) of how to state the emotion of Ruysdael in terms of post-impressionist painting must disappear as a problem as soon as it is realised that the Ruysdael emotion is no longer authentic.⁴⁶

This is faint praise indeed, for no sooner does Beckett claim that McGonigal is preoccupied with attempting to 'state' aspects of van Ruisdael's seventeenth-century treatment of landscape in terms of post-impressionism than he declares Ruisdael's approach irrecoverable, fundamentally anachronistic. The implication is that despite having learned the lesson of Cézanne et al., McGonigal's underlying attitude is still beholden to the outdated realism that Beckett accurately sees as dominating officially approved Irish painting.

Beckett's sardonic label for the combination of realism and state-sanction that he associates with the School of Art is 'Veronicism'. The term occurs in the course of a reference to Seán O'Sullivan, a painter acquaintance who specialized in portraits of the political and cultural elite of the new state. A consummate insider, O'Sullivan was the youngest ever associate member of the Royal Hibernian Academy, and by 1931 was elected an academician. Veronica was of course the woman who passed a cloth to Jesus in the course of the Passion, and later found it to bear the image of his face. The connection to Sullivan's portraiture is obvious, although Beckett also uses the term to indict a broader approach to representation that prizes accurate mimesis, an absolute indexical link between subject and object. Deirdre Bair has an account of a moment in O'Sullivan's studio when, after listening to the assembled company praise

⁴⁵ Letter to MacGreevy, 20 December 1931, *LSBI*, pp. 99–102, p. 100. MacGreevy had stated in 1927 that Orpen's *The Ptarmigan* was 'one of the finest amongst his earliest pictures'. See MacGreevy (1927), pp. 251–252, p. 252.

⁴⁶ Letter to MacGreevy, 8 September 1934, *LSBI*, pp. 219–227, pp. 222–223.

an ‘up and coming Irish realist’, Beckett ‘suddenly derided the painter as “a Veronicist who would wipe the face of Christ with a sanitary towel” and stamped angrily out’.⁴⁷ Beckett’s use of the word suggests once again that he saw an important link between a realist aesthetic in painting and religious authority. Thus in March 1936 Beckett writes: ‘Sean I do not see. Not only is he a Veronicist, but he reads Mauriac with relish.’⁴⁸ The association of the famously Catholic novelist Charles Mauriac with O’Sullivan’s practice emphasizes the link Beckett sees between the latter’s work and the increasingly Catholic state in which the painter was flourishing. Later in 1936 another letter makes a further connection to the Metropolitan School itself, seeing its transformation into the National College of Art as creating a kind of benefice for officially approved artists: ‘Sean looks forward to getting a teaching job in the reorganized School of Art, at £6 a week, that will relieve him from the necessity of painting at all.’⁴⁹

Veronica also makes an appearance in ‘Eneug II’, which Pilling and Lawlor date to early August 1931. It is a text that takes up many of the concerns with painting that Beckett was pursuing in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*.⁵⁰ This is particularly clear towards the end of the poem, in the lines ‘lying on O’Connell Bridge/goggling at the tulips of the evening/the green tulips’.⁵¹ In an earlier draft the second line quoted here reads ‘goggling like a fool at the tulips of the evening’, which parallels the opening of the *Abendmahl* ekphrasis of *Dream*: ‘He goggled like a fool at the shrieking paullo-post-Expression of the Last Supper.’⁵² Where in *Dream* Belacqua responds actively to Dülberg’s vivid painting, however, the narrator of ‘Eneug II’ seems altogether more passive. The poem’s opening line – ‘world world world world’ – has a weary, desperate insistence, as if it is a futile attempt to assert the here and now in spite of the urge towards transcendence. Yet this urge is at least partially realized in the ghostly image introduced in the next line: ‘and the face grave/cloud against the evening’.⁵³

Such a tension between a spectral transcendence and the materiality of the world continues the theologico-political concerns we have seen in ‘Casket’ and elsewhere, and once again it is around the representation of Christ that the issue turns. For ‘Eneug II’ the attempt to separate the world and the theological image is impossible, and a constant flickering

⁴⁷ Bair (1978), p. 116. ⁴⁸ Letter to Arland Ussher, 25 March 1936, *LSBr*, pp. 327–330, p. 328.

⁴⁹ Letter to MacGreevy, 7 August 1936, *LSBr*, pp. 365–369, p. 367. ⁵⁰ Beckett (2012), p. 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* ⁵² Beckett (1992), p. 77. ⁵³ Beckett (2012), p. 9.

oscillation between them is performed in the subtle textual difference between the two lines where the Veronica is invoked

Veronica mundi
Veronica munda

As Lawlor and Pilling point out, these lines draw on the epitaph for Rosamund, mistress of Henry II of England: 'Hic jacet in tomba Rosa Mundi non Rosa Munda' ('here lies Rose the worldly not Rose the clean') – lines that imply Rosamund was a prostitute.⁵⁴ In Beckett's hands the opposition between *mundi* and *munda* becomes a variation on the one between the material world and its transcendence that haunts his treatment of religious painting in the 1930s. More importantly, by associating this epitaph with the tradition of the Veronica, Beckett again links the imagined face that the poem evokes with a radically realist representation of Jesus. A representation that eventually compels total assent: 'Doch, doch I assure thee', as the despairing capitulation of the last line puts it.

The context that have been sketching out above is, while clearly specific to Ireland in its detail, one that is in some ways typical of the wider European experience in the 1930s. All across the continent questions of the relationship between art and politics were being raised with an unprecedented urgency. These are of course questions that had been exercising Irish artists and writers since the late 1890s, and the proximity to actual violent social transformation concentrated them still further. Tim Armstrong has argued that a split between 'the political and aesthetic avant-garde ... happened rather earlier in Ireland than elsewhere, as a result of the rapid post-independence vitiation of those revolutionary pressures which might sustain an oppositional aesthetic'.⁵⁵ Certainly the political avant-garde in Ireland very rapidly distinguished itself from the aesthetic avant-garde once independence was achieved, and this was reflected above all in the painting produced by Keating, McGonigal and O'Sullivan, all of whom had fought in the War of Independence. However, as I have been arguing, an aesthetic avant-garde did persist in Dublin, and it was one that, for a time at least, maintained the classic position of the historical avant-garde, that is to say one committed to a continuity between aesthetic and political radicalism predicated on a suspicion of representation as ideology. Beckett's contacts with many of the key figures

⁵⁴ Beckett (2012), p. 268.

⁵⁵ Armstrong (1995), pp. 43–74, p. 46.

in this coterie, and his clear distaste for the normative aesthetic evident in Irish painting, suggest that certain of his positions in the 1930s – in particular his treatment of landscape, his suspicion of realism and his ironic deployment of religious imagery – should be seen in this context (even if, as I have suggested, he was also moving beyond it). However, there is another, perhaps even more relevant, arena in the 1930s where very similar issues were being played out, and where Beckett found himself once again at the centre of things: inter-war Paris.

Beckett had originally arrived in the French capital at a moment when the dominant political influence on the arts was passing decisively from the left to the right. This shift has been well documented by art historians such as Romy Golan, Christopher Green and others. As Green puts it, ‘the new Right is the most revealing direction from which to explore the politicized role given to the past in the French modern art world from the late 1920s’.⁵⁶ Green’s reference here to the use of the past in the present turns on the way the French rural landscape, and the peasants who once farmed it, started to appear in French painting as images of a national tradition that was perceived to be under threat. In some ways, as Green and many others have pointed out, this was a reaction against the cosmopolitanism of L’École de Paris, that group of mostly émigré artists who had revolutionized art in the pre-war years. The new painting was French rather than Parisian and painters like Derain, Despiau, Dufresne, Tcheliatchev, Berard, Vlaminck and Dunoyer de Segonzac as well as sculptors like Maillol were its torch-bearers.⁵⁷ As Kenneth Silver has argued, a current of anti-German feeling underpins much of the sentiment around this work, which was understood as distinctively Latin rather than Nordic, associated with the Mediterranean and therefore Hellenism.⁵⁸ To this extent it forms a distinctively nationalistic strain of the more general neo-classicism of the 1920s, one which combined a celebration of rural authenticity with notions of transcendent universal forms. Thus many of the painters and sculptors concerned placed the human figure at the heart of their work. Romy Golan meanwhile has demonstrated the centrality of landscape painting to the art of the period.⁵⁹ The importance of these motifs, as Green suggests, left the work ‘unequivocally open’ to political manipulation: ‘it could be called ... both anti-materialist and anti-individualist:

⁵⁶ Green (2001), p. 222.

⁵⁷ In a 1948 letter to Georges Duthuit, Beckett refers to ‘unthinkable Derain’. Letter to Georges Duthuit, 8 November 1948, *LSBII*, pp. 96–99, p. 96.

⁵⁸ Silver (1989). ⁵⁹ Golan (1995).

it could be called “human” and “organic”. It was called all these things.’⁶⁰ The terms human and organic will become very important to Beckett’s attitudes to painting in the 1930s, as we shall see.

The new art also had its dedicated interpreters and apologists in France, and as Green says ‘there was one critic on the new right, respected across a wide spectrum of moderate opinion, who put together a particularly coherent polemic in favour of the active presence of the past in the present’.⁶¹ That critic was Waldemar Georges and the vehicle for his polemic was the small avant-garde art journal *Formes*.

In the very early 1930s Thomas McGreevy was the secretary of the English-language edition of *Formes*, which came out alongside the French version and was aimed at the expatriate audience in Paris, as well as artistic and intellectual audiences in the Anglophone world. In his ‘Weekly Notes on Art’ in *The Listener*, Herbert Read heralded the second issue as ‘an interesting new magazine from Paris’ (and incidentally gave the correspondence address as 18, Rue Godot-de-Mauroy).⁶² McGreevy’s tenure was relatively short, however, running from December 1929 to January 1931, although the journal would continue until March 1933. Beckett stepped in for McGreevy for two of these issues, while the latter was in Ireland, and there are signs in his correspondence that relations with the editorial board were strained. The very first mention of *Formes*, in March 1930, is the following: ‘I bearded the 2 salauds in den 40 [for 42] as instructed, and translated their titles’.⁶³ The ‘bastards’ mentioned here are very probably Waldemar Georges, the Art Director and Marcel Zahar, secretary of the French edition. When MacGreevy returns there is evidence of some kind of dispute. In December 1930, for example, McGreevy wrote to Charles Prentice

Formes has busted, it’s all over. There was a row over policy and the Editor resigned and the proprietor thought it was a good opportunity to cut the losses he’s been talking so much about. I’m undecided yet what to do.⁶⁴

In the event, McGreevy stayed for one more issue. However, if *Formes* really had been all over there would have been no decision for him to make, he would simply have been out of a job. It thus seems possible that McGreevy was taking the opportunity to extricate himself from the situation for other reasons. And if one considers the way the magazine

⁶⁰ Green (1990), pp. 267–282, p. 269.

⁶¹ Green (2001), p. 222.

⁶² Read (1930), p. 412.

⁶³ Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 1 March 1930, *LSBr*, pp. 19–20, p. 19.

⁶⁴ Letter received by Charles Prentice 2 December 1930. See *LSBr*, p. 51, n. 6.

was evolving under the influence of Georges it is not difficult to detect them.

From the issue published immediately before McGreevy's letter to Prentice, a new and radical set of ideas had begun to appear in the magazine and more particularly in Georges' contributions to it. The key proposition was the centrality of the idea of man, and related notions of the human, to contemporary painting. Hence in his essay 'Neuralgic Points' of November 1930 Georges approvingly argues that a 'tendency to humanise fauna and flora is a mark of the young school of painters who are half metaphysicians', while Jean Lurçat – a friend of McGreevy's with whom Beckett will stay for a period in May 1932 – is praised as 'human and direct'.⁶⁵ Even Picasso is admired for his 'anthropomorphism'.⁶⁶ The rhetoric reaches its climax, however, in the January 1931 issue, the last for which McGreevy acts as Secretary, as Georges begins to speak of a campaign, the object of which 'is to make restitution to man, the king of the world, of his ancient prestige', and to hail 'the sign of man, the microcosm of the universe and measure of all things'.⁶⁷

By March 1931 Georges is arguing that Max Beckmann's work 'offer[s] the best of the white race'.⁶⁸ And at the end of 1931 he is engaged in an all-out assault on the cosmopolitan École de Paris, with its 'rites, beliefs and superstitions', its 'out-worn bohemianism' and belief in 'permanent revolution' that is a 'turning aside from the main highway of French thought'.⁶⁹ As the painter Amédée Ozenfant put it in response to *Formes*' approval of the Nazi closure of the Bauhaus in 1933: 'We used to have a so-called "avant-garde" magazine . . . and beginning this month we can say that we have a fascist magazine.'⁷⁰

The letters Beckett wrote immediately after his return to Ireland in late 1930 indicate reservations about the political climate that lay behind the kind of nationalistic art criticism that was appearing not only in *Formes* but other more mainstream magazines like *l'Amour de L'Art*. When Beckett remembers the 'French nightmare' or refers to 'too many Frenchman in the wrong streets' he may be registering the antipathy felt by some towards the cosmopolitan populations that congregated in Montparnasse, which was very much his own stamping ground.⁷¹ A flavour of this antipathy can be gleaned from Henri Massis' description of the Left Bank in the 1930s:

⁶⁵ Georges (1930c), p. 21.

⁶⁶ Georges (1930b), p. 9.

⁶⁷ Georges (1931a), p. 2.

⁶⁸ Georges (1931b), p. 50.

⁶⁹ Georges (1931c).

⁷⁰ Affron (1997), pp. 171–204, p. 202.

⁷¹ Letter to Charles Prentice, 7 August 1931, *LSBI*, pp. 81–83, p. 82; Letter to Thomas McGreevy, 12 September 1931, *LSBI*, pp. 87–89, p. 88.

'Saint-Germain-des-Prés with its pederasts, its voyeurs, its crypto-Communist morass of three-trousered sexes, its filthy exhibitionism, its dubious aestheticism and its foreign cosmopolitanism'.⁷²

Massis is an important figure, alongside Jacques Maritain and Mauriac, in the resurgence of French Catholic thought and culture in the period.⁷³ We have already seen the way Beckett saw a painter like Seán O'Sullivan in relation to French Catholicism. More broadly, writers like Maurice Barrès, Charles Maurras and Leon Daudet had cobbled together an atavistic sense of French identity to produce an anti-German, 'Latin' nationalism that was reflected in French painting through representations of rural life.⁷⁴ Beckett's July 1930 declaration that he is reading Schopenhauer, in the face of ridicule from his French friends, because he is 'interested in Leopardi or Proust rather than Carducci or Barrès', clearly states his preference for modernism over such reactions against it. The statement also implies that this distinguishes him from others at the *École normale supérieure*.⁷⁵ This may register the influence of what Jean-Louis Loubet de Bayle has dubbed the 'non-conformists' such as Emmanuel Mounier. In Seth Armus's words, these were 'spiritually-oriented young men who, left homeless by Action Française and under the influence of Heidegger, sought to infuse French Catholicism with a youthful "revolutionary" doctrine'.⁷⁶ It is in this intellectual context that Beckett's close friend, tutee and Vichy-era collaborator Georges Pelorson belongs.⁷⁷ As Sandrine Sanos has pointed out, other right-wing writers such as Thierry Maulnier and Jean de Fabrègues were at this time propagating the doctrine of what they called Neo-Humanism, with Maulnier, for example, publishing a book entitled *La Crise est dans l'Homme*.⁷⁸ Central to their thought was the assertion of what they saw as an essentially French neo-classical rationalism. Maulnier and de Fabrègues were friendly with Pelorson, and all three were students at the ENS while Beckett was *lecteur*, Maulnier under his birth name of Jacques Talagrand.⁷⁹ A copy of Maulnier's 1939 *Introduction à la Poésie Française* was preserved in Beckett's library on his death.⁸⁰

⁷² Massis, (Paris: 1961), quoted in Sanos (2012), p. 29.

⁷³ See Sanos (2012). On Maritain see Heynicks and Mayaer (2010). ⁷⁴ Silver (1989).

⁷⁵ Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, c. 18–25 July 1930, *LSBI*, pp. 31–35, p. 33.

⁷⁶ See Loubet del Bayle (1969); Armus (2001), pp. 271–304, p. 271.

⁷⁷ See Giroud (2000), pp. 221–248. ⁷⁸ Maulnier (1932)

⁷⁹ For Maulnier's subsequent trajectory see Antliff (2008), pp. 45–62.

⁸⁰ Nixon and van Hulle (2013), p. 75.

Waldemar Georges too must be seen in this context, that of a conservative, spiritualist, reaction against the avant-garde, cosmopolitan modernism of the very circles in which Beckett was moving. Indeed Georges advocated what he himself called a 'Neo-Humanist' art, publishing an essay of that title in *L'Amour de l'Art* in 1934.⁸¹ As Affron puts it: 'fundamentally anthropocentric and classicizing ... Georges saw this Neo-Humanism as the common destiny for contemporary art in Italy and France.'⁸²

As mentioned earlier, the sculptor Maillol was one of Georges' major enthusiasms and was also very important for Maulnier. The first issue of *Formes* on which Beckett worked contained an essay by Jules Romain on the sculptor.⁸³ This would undoubtedly have attracted Beckett's attention, given his interest in Romain and Unanimism. However, it is safe to assume that he did not find the subject-matter attractive, if his reference in 1937 to the '4 rather dull Maillols' in the Deutsches Museum is anything to go by.⁸⁴ For Georges, by contrast, Maillol combined the authenticity of a reassuring peasant heritage with a classicizing eye and a populist touch. These are traits that conform also to the official aesthetic of post-Independence Ireland, enough in itself to ensure Beckett's dismissal, but suggestive too of the profound continuities between the situation which he would soon return to in Dublin and the one he was experiencing in France.

Such continuity becomes even more marked if we turn to another essay in the April 1930 issue of *Formes*, bearing in mind that when it was published Beckett was acting as deputy for McGreevy, and would certainly have read it carefully. This is a piece by Waldemar Georges himself, on Cézanne, that is a key moment in the evolution of his strident attacks on the avant-garde in the name of an authoritarian humanism. It is an indication of Georges' militancy and ambition that he chooses to launch his Neo-Humanist campaign with an attempt to wrest Cézanne back from the clutches of the avant-garde. Ever since Maurice Denis, in a statement that Georges quotes without attribution in his essay, had argued that Cézanne's works exemplify the fundamental nature of painting as an assemblage of coloured marks on a canvas, the painter had been seen as an essentially revolutionary artist. Georges is having none of this, arguing that 'one must make a clean sweep of Post-Cézannian art and criticism', and regretting the fact that Cézanne 'has become a purveyor of avant-garde

⁸¹ Georges (1934). ⁸² Affron (1997). ⁸³ Romain (1930), pp. 5–7.

⁸⁴ Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 19 August 1937, *LSBI*, pp. 543–545, p. 543.

movements of all categories . . . exploited by the enfranchised painters, the “modernists” of Europe and America’.⁸⁵ Instead Georges inserts Cézanne into the tradition of French landscape painting, and in so doing complies with that current of contemporary art criticism that was deploying the landscape itself as a sign of the integrity of French identity.⁸⁶ We can go further than this, however, to say that Georges’ notion of the landscape tradition also clearly echoes the rhetoric of Maulnier and others, by investing in a French identity that is predicated on order and a neo-classical rationalism. As Georges puts it elsewhere:

French landscape art from Poussin to Corot is an accord between man and the world and not a victory of nature over man. The genres which interpret a state of civilization . . . are not eternal. But they all show an active attitude on the part of man before facts. They bear the mark, the seal, the stamp of humanism.⁸⁷

The political utility of the notion of an anthropomorphized landscape is revealed here in particularly stark terms, and Beckett’s constant return to this question throughout the 1930s takes on a new significance. According to Georges the more a painting demonstrates the distinctively human purchase on, and domination of, nature, the more French it is. Landscapes that do not participate in such humanism cannot be part of the French canon of painting. Georges goes on to see Cézanne’s landscapes as living organisms; they ‘are never fractions of the infinite, but perfectly autonomous organisms, complete and autonomous. They are living bodies subjected to the physical laws of balance and weight.’⁸⁸

Such an idea of accord between French painter and landscape, between ‘man and world’ is the exact opposite of Beckett’s own understanding of what is at stake in Cézanne’s work, as set out three years later in the much-discussed letters to McGreevy of 1934.⁸⁹ Beckett’s explicit use of Cézanne as a figure with which to outline an aesthetic must be seen against the background of Georges’ neo-Humanism. Indeed I will be suggesting that Beckett’s reactions against *Formes*’ language of humanism, anthropomorphism and accord enables him to modify further the combination of Bergsonism and formalism that was set out in the [last chapter](#), pushing it in a direction where the figure of Leibniz begins to assume a surprisingly central role.

⁸⁵ Georges (1930a), pp. 19–22, p. 19.

⁸⁶ Golan (1995).

⁸⁷ Georges (1931a), p. 2.

⁸⁸ Georges (April 1930a), p. 20.

⁸⁹ Letters to Thomas McGreevy, 8 and 16 September 1934, *LSBI*, pp. 219–230.

Having said that, however, it is also crucial that these developments only take place after Beckett has spent the greater proportion of two years in post-Independence Ireland. As I argued earlier in this chapter, the return to Ireland, with its firmly entrenched myth of landscape and figure homologous to that developing in France, provokes in Beckett an examination of authoritarian uses of the image in religious painting. It also enables him to see clearly the limitations of the Bergsonian, vitalist discourse that exists in a tense relationship with ideas of form, autonomy and totality in *Proust*. What is striking about the Cézanne letters of 1934 is their proposal of an alternative response. Rather than the notions of flux and sensuous experience that appear intermittently in *Proust* and *Dream*, here we have the flat assertion of the ‘unapproachably alien’ and ‘unintelligible’ nature of the non-human world. The relevant passages from the correspondence are well-known, but I will quote at length in order to demonstrate the extent to which Beckett here picks up on a rhetoric similar to Georges’:

[w]hat a relief the Mont St Victoire after all the anthropomorphised landscape – van Goyen, Avercamp, the Ruysdaels, Hobbema, even Claude, Wilson and Crome Yellow Esq., or paranthropomorphised by Watteau . . . or hyperanthropomorphized by Rubens . . . Cézanne seems to have been the first to see landscape and state it as material of a strictly peculiar order, incommensurable with all human expressions whatsoever. Atomistic landscape with no velleities of vitalism.⁹⁰

Beckett then returns to these themes in his next letter, clearly responding to objections and requests for clarification from McGreevy. He is writing here of the *Portrait of Cézanne*:

I do not see any possibility of relationship, friendly or unfriendly with the unintelligible, and what I feel in Cézanne is precisely the absence of a rapport that was all right for Rosa or Ruysdael for whom the animising mode was valid, but would have been false for him, because he had the sense of his incommensurability not only with life of such a different order as landscape but even with life of his own order, even with the life – one feels looking at the self-portrait in the Tate . . . operative in himself.⁹¹

There are two points to be made here. First there is a clear modification in Beckett’s relation to Bergson. This occurs in the rejection of ‘the velleities of vitalism’, and later in the modification and clarification of this phrase when Beckett writes that what he ‘feels’ here is the alienation of the artist,

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

both from his surroundings and from his own organic energies.⁹² As with the Rembrandt portrait in *Dream*, rather than a Bergsonian record of the processional, durational qualities of the *élan vital*, Beckett reads Cézanne's portrait as the record of the refusal or impossibility of grasping such a process. However there is also a difference from *Dream*, in that this refusal, this change in stance, is now signalled by the terminology of atomization rather than flux, with attendant notions of a spatialized order in the ascendant over one of temporal flow. In this way we might understand the Cézanne letters as pushing to an extreme that aspect of the aesthetic of the statement that prioritizes dispassion, formal unity and integrity. Beckett's latent attraction to the notion of autonomous form is allied to a full-blown anti-humanism and anti-organicism, to produce an essentially negative aesthetic defined by inanition, petrification and the inorganic.⁹³ This is the first full articulation of a position that I see as central to Beckett's mature aesthetic, and it is a clear refutation of Georges' reading of Cézanne.

It is significant, however, that despite the rhetoric of an absolute alienation from life, the self and the human in these letters, Beckett still insists on what he *feels* in front of Cézanne's pictures. Communication and contact is still taking place at the level of the relationship between viewer and viewed, even as Beckett narrativizes the content as demonstrating epistemological breakdown. This paradox can also be discerned in the seamless way Beckett moves in these letters from a consideration of landscape, to one of portraiture; which sees an *external* breakdown between self and other, man and world, mirrored in an *internal* fracture between self and 'life'. It is this internal fracturing that speaks to Beckett as he stands in front of both paintings, so that Cézanne's depiction of an absolute hermeticism exits in its opposite: empathy, connection, feeling. In a moment that again gestures towards future aesthetic positions, radical negativity forms a mode of communication. We will be returning to this in more detail in [Chapter 4](#).

Beckett himself notes a tension between his reading of Cézanne's self-portrait and his examination of landscape in *Echo's Bones*. Commenting on

⁹² However, there is also something Bergsonian about the idea of being equally cut off from the world and one's self. See Bergson (1921), p. 151: 'Between nature and ourselves, nay, between ourselves and our own consciousness, a veil is interposed'.

⁹³ In this way there is an intriguing parallel between Beckett's language in the Cézanne letters and the critic Carl Einstein's appraisal of Hercules Seghers in Bataille's *Documents* 4 and 5 in 1929. Einstein's anti-humanism is precisely the kind of avant-garde critical writing that Georges had in his sights in 1930. Seghers subsequently becomes very important for Beckett.

his vision of the self-portrait as a kind of inhuman vista he says: ‘no doubt I exaggerate the improbability of turning into landscape one very fine day, is that why the Ghirlandaio *Dafne* means so much to me? But from one’s own ragbag of dissociations to the pantheistic monism of the *Metamorphoses* is a saut too perillaux altogether.’⁹⁴ Beckett misattributes to Ghirlandaio a painting by Pollaiuolo, *Apollo and Daphne*, which depicts Daphne in the process of transformation into a laurel. But what is significant here is that even as Beckett admits the image’s attraction he also admits its impossibility. The concurrent rejection of what he calls, after Spinoza, ‘pantheistic monism’ is another indication of his increasing distance from a Bergsonism which sees all life as partaking of a single, unified, essentially creative force, and his replacement of this by an atomized, monadic landscape of total disconnection. A dualism of some sort is making itself felt here, paving the way for the rise in the importance of Kant for Beckett.

The reference to the *Metamorphoses* points up the fact that the book of poems that he would publish just four months later, in December 1935, was itself named after another of Ovid’s tales: ‘Echo’s bones were turned to stone’ is the line, noted in the *Dream* notebook, from which Beckett took his title.⁹⁵ In Poussin’s painting of this moment, *Echo et Narcisse*, hanging in the Louvre at the time, this moment of transformation is dramatized, with Echo’s hair and head, left arm and shin beginning to take on the reddish-brown tinge of the rock on which she lies. The picture illuminates the way the collection of poems, even as it subtly questions the ideological exploitation of the pathetic fallacy, is by no means devoid of what Beckett calls ‘the transformation into landscape’. More specifically, Beckett’s title *Echo’s Bones*, chosen very late in the publication process, in March 1935, emphasizes that in some (though not all) of these poems the metamorphosis is one from the organic to the inorganic, flesh to stone, rather than the other way around.⁹⁶ This reflects the change in Beckett’s own aesthetic position, and his move towards a rhetoric of atomization and the inhuman. It is notable, for example, that the last poem to be written at once anthropomorphises the landscape and emphasizes its resistance to such troping, by calling it a ‘tissue that will not serve’.⁹⁷

This notion of landscape as resistant to meaning is another way in which the politics of contemporary painting makes its presence felt. After visiting

⁹⁴ Letter to MacGreevy, 16 September 1934, *LSBr*, pp. 227–230, p. 228.

⁹⁵ See Pilling (1999), p. 156. ⁹⁶ Letter to George Reavey, 15 March 1935, *LSBr*, p. 264.

⁹⁷ Beckett (2012), p. 5.

Galway in 1932, Beckett compares the county with Wicklow, and describes his trip as one 'through bog and mountain scenery that was somehow far more innocent and easy and obvious than the stealthy secret variety we have here'.⁹⁸ In his next letter, responding presumably to MacGreevy's objections, Beckett picks up the theme again, shifting now into the rhetoric of the sublime: 'The lowest mountains here [i.e. Wicklow] terrify me far more than anything I saw in Connemara or Achill' and claiming to be 'reduced almost to incontinence by the calm secret hostility'.⁹⁹

The repeated notion of secrecy seems to be key here, in opposition to the 'obvious' quality of the landscape of the West. That is to say, Beckett appears to find an ease and transparency of interpretation in the Connemara scenes which is unavailable to him in Wicklow. This is confirmed when the motif returns in the 1934 Cézanne letter, and Beckett complains of being 'exhausted of meaning by the mountains' around his Dublin home.¹⁰⁰ The phrase is interesting, in that it ascribes a mutual exhaustion of meaning to both mountains and self. As with his relation with Cézanne's work, here contact is achieved through negativity: it is the way that the mountains drain meaning from Beckett that creates a communication between him and the landscape that both terrifies and exalts. It is as if Beckett becomes himself mineralized, as dumb as stone. We shall see something very similar in his account of Jack B. Yeats' painting.

The implication is that the effortless ascription of meaning to the landscape of the West is by contrast facile, a dismissal which is a clear, if coded, attack on contemporary nationalist ideologies. In the painting of Paul Henry and his followers, the West of Ireland was anointed as the locus of the values of the new rural, Catholic nation. The contours of Beckett's local environment cannot be so easily recruited to such a narrative. Or only through deception. This is what lies behind the variation on the 'eye-squint torture' we find in 'Draff', from *More Pricks than Kicks*. Driving through the Wicklow hills the narrator looks up and comments that his car's 'anti-dazzle windshield' has the effect of making the hills seem like 'the picture of Paul Henry'.¹⁰¹ The reference here is to a contemporary 'Visit Wicklow' poster from the London Midlands and Railway Company, with the implication that the slightly tinted screen

⁹⁸ Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 8 October 1932, *LSBr*, pp. 126–133, p. 127.

⁹⁹ Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 18 October 1932, *LSBr*, pp. 133–138, p. 136.

¹⁰⁰ Letter to MacGreevy, 1934, *LSBr*, p. 223. ¹⁰¹ Beckett (2010), p. 180.

mates and beautifies the surroundings into an image – like Henry’s – amenable to commercial (or political) exploitation.

A continuity thus runs through these scattered comments on landscape and painting. Taken together, they exemplify an aspect of Beckett’s aesthetics that will only grow in importance at the expense of the traces of a Bergsonian vitalism in *Proust*. Beckett’s attraction to both Cézanne and the Wicklow mountains demonstrates his desire for a mineralized, ‘inorganic’ objectivity, bereft of subjective expression, where the human sinks into the landscape as Echo’s bones are turned to stone. And there is also the formalist drive towards the overt artificiality of the garden, rather than the illusionistic sublime of a nationalist Irish naturalism or the bogus humanist organicism of Waldemar Georges.

Right at the end of the last story of *More Pricks than Kicks* Beckett takes up this newly sharpened dichotomy between the vestiges of vitalism and a new austere formalism, in terms of what he calls a Classico-Romanticism. The scene takes place in a moonlit Wicklow graveyard, with ‘the mountains swarthy Ucello behind the headstones’.¹⁰² Given the paucity of extent paintings, we might speculate with some confidence that the Ucello Beckett has in mind is *The Battle of San Romano*, which once again he would have known from London, where a backdrop of mountains rears up very close to the picture plane. In a letter to Nuala Costello, Beckett described Ucello as one of the presiding influences on *More Pricks than Kicks*.¹⁰³ In the 1920s and 1930s there was much interest in the early Renaissance and the Italian primitives, and Beckett’s tastes conform to this. Ucello was a major figure for the surrealists, for example. His obsessive, non-naturalistic use of perspective, his highly stylized and patterned compositions and uncommunicative inanimate figures signalled a way back to figuration without succumbing to an unreflective realism.¹⁰⁴ For Beckett in ‘Draff’ the same qualities usefully counteract the tendency to sublimity inherent in a moonlit, country churchyard scene. As he describes it,

[t]he groundsman stood deep in thought. What with the company of headstones sighing and gleaming like bones, the moon on the job, the sea tossing in her dreams and panting, and the hills observing their Attic vigil in the background, he was at a loss to determine off-hand whether the scene was of the kind that is termed romantic or whether it should not

¹⁰² *Ibid.* ¹⁰³ Letter to Nuala Costello, 10 May 1934, *LSBI*, pp. 206–211, p. 208.

¹⁰⁴ Breton refers to Uccello on a number of occasions, most famously in the first Surrealist Manifesto of 1924. See also Dalí’s 1930 reference to the painter in Matheson (2006), pp. 424–427.

with more justice be deemed classical. Both elements were present, that was indisputable. Perhaps classico-romantic would be the fairest estimate. A classico-romantic scene. Personally he felt calm and wistful. A classico-romantic working man therefore.¹⁰⁵

The fact that *More Pricks than Kicks* closes with this scene grants it a certain force. The passage speaks to the complex of ideas we have been tracking in several ways. It is, for example, rife with vitalism and anthropomorphism: the headstones sigh and gleam, the sea dreams and pants. The hills, by contrast, are conceived in Classical terms as observing an 'Attic' vigil. The Classicism and Romanticism debate was of course a familiar theme of politicized aesthetic debate in both Britain and France in the period, running from the essays of Charles Maurras and T. E. Hulme to those of Thierry Maulnier and Herbert Read. However, once again Beckett characteristically refracts the opposition through his own concerns. Thus the ominous 'vigil' of the hills repeats the calm, secret hostility of the Wicklow mountains in the 1932 letter to McGreevy, while the connotations of Uccello's highly artificial, static formal painting also links the Wicklow hills to their description as a 'garden'. At the end of *More Pricks than Kicks*, Beckett thus draws on painting to acknowledge a duality at the heart of his thinking in the mid-1930s, a productive tension between a Classical attraction to a rigorous objective formal clarity that nevertheless often co-exists with a vulnerability to Romantic affect, organicism and authenticity. The fact that it is specifically a Classico-Romantic 'working-man' that is described here is an ironic trace of the wider political debates concerning national culture, mass politics and revolution, which, as I have shown in this chapter, are also an important factor in the evolution of Beckett's poetics of the image in the 1930s. During his trip to Germany in 1936–1937, such factors will loom even larger.

¹⁰⁵ Beckett (2010), p. 180.

Beckett's German Renaissance

The combination of a highly formal analysis with philosophical notions of inwardness is a prominent feature of the German, Swiss and Austrian art history that grew in strength and sophistication throughout the nineteenth century.¹ This is a broadly Kantian body of work, yet one which adapts Kantian ideas of the nature of aesthetic experience to allow for historical change.² The story told in this tradition is, as Christopher Wood puts it, one of 'a continuous, progressive rise of a subjective art that appealed to individual beholders through the play of light and shadow and representation of interior psychological states'.³ Such a description is suggestive for an account of Beckett's writing and thinking about art in the diaries he kept during his tour of Germany in 1936–1937. For the way Wood identifies a combination of the objective, formal 'play of light and shadow', and the subjective question of states of interiority, speaks directly to the struggle going on at the heart of Beckett's own thinking about art. And yet Beckett seems initially unaware of what Walter Benjamin called this 'rigorous study of art'.⁴ Certainly the art books mentioned in the diaries and letters of the time suggests the more traditional and general approach of *Kunsts Geschichte*, with its supply lines in philology, theology and intellectual history. Thus publications by Wilhelm von Bode, Georg Dehio, Max Friedländer and Ludwig Justi complement the diary's characteristic mode of listing paintings with their dates and provenance.⁵ That is to say, Beckett often adopts the position and assumptions of a connoisseur, and

¹ For detailed analysis see Podro (1982). For a thought-provoking account of the relationship between this art history and critical theory see Schwarz (2005).

² For a good summary of the Kantian heritage see Mundt (1959), pp. 287–310.

³ Wood (2002), pp. 65–92, p. 70. ⁴ See Benjamin (1988), pp. 84–90.

⁵ Beckett mentions that he has Bode (1929) in a letter to MacGreevy of 20 December 1936, *LSBr*, pp. 399–404, p. 402. Entries in the diary making reference to attributions by Max Friedländer and Karel van Mander (both 17 December 1936) are taken from here. Beckett also asks if MacGreevy knows 'Friedlander's *Die altniederländischen Malerei* or Dehio's colossal work' in the aforementioned letter. The diary mentions 'Dehio's denkmaler', on 3 March 1937, a reference to Georg Dehio's

the object of his travels in Germany seems to be to educate himself in preparation for a career as such. On the other hand, the books he read by Max Sauerlandt and Karl Scheffler are general accounts of recent German painting that contrast with the new art history in a different manner, being populist, journalistic surveys aimed at the general reader.⁶ Yet despite these tendencies, as the trip continued, Beckett's encounters with German artists, critics, curators and collectors exposed him to the language, assumptions and sensibility that informed academic art history in Germany, and certain aspects resonated powerfully with his own established concerns.

A good place to begin to assess Beckett's assimilation of German-language art history is with his contact with a loose group of late-Expressionist painters associated with the last years of the Hamburg Secession: Karl Ballmer, Karl Kluth, Wilhelm Grimm, Hans Martin Ruwoldt and Eduard Bargheer. As he records it in his diary, Beckett is taken almost immediately deep into these painters' aesthetic world.⁷ In a contemporary letter to McGreevy, Beckett describes the two men's 'enthusiasm for early Christian miniature painting, especially the Irish Celtic'.⁸ This point of contact between debates on 'Nordic' art and what Beckett sees as an Irish tradition is pivotal to Beckett's assimilation of such German ideas, particularly in the later stages of his journey, when he carefully notes the architectural traces of medieval Irish missions in the churches of southern Germany.⁹ His conversations in Hamburg seem to have opened his eyes for the first time to the beauty and importance of medieval work in miniature, and he will regularly seek them out during his stay. Thus in Bamberg's Staatsbibliothek, for example, he will study the eleventh-century illuminated manuscript the Reichenau Apocalypse, and wonder at the intricacy of its tiny images.¹⁰

The high standing of 'Celtic' work in Expressionist circles derived ultimately from Wilhelm Worringer's widely read *Abstraction and Empathy: Essays in the Psychology of Style* of 1908, and its 1911 successor *Form in the Gothic*, where geometrical visual forms previously associated with mere 'decoration' assume a central significance in a nationalist project to forge a stylistically distinct tradition of Northern European art.¹¹ Worringer paid

Handbuch der deutschen Kunstdenkmäler series. On 20 January 1937 Beckett unsuccessfully tried to find Justi's *Giorgione* (Berlin: 1926). Beckett also mentions Springer (1913).

⁶ Sauerlandt (n.d.); Scheffler (1909).

⁷ GD., 25.11.36.

⁸ Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 28 January 1937, *LSBr*, pp. 386–394, p. 387.

⁹ See, for example, the reference to the Bamberg 'Claddagh'. GD., 20.2.37. ¹⁰ GD., 24.2.37.

¹¹ Worringer (1953); (1957).

special attention to the 'Northern animal style' of the first millennium AD, with its sinuous, non-representational patterning. It is probably this that accounts for Beckett's reference to the Celtic. Worringer saw such 'abstract' art as an alternative to a Southern European art of 'empathy', expressed above all in Italian naturalism, that betokened an intimate, confident relationship with the world. What Worringer calls 'expressive abstraction', by contrast, registered anxiety and alienation from the real and a corresponding attempt to control it through schematization. Here three-dimensional space is displaced by what Worringer termed the 'geometric-crystalline'. This element of abstraction he regarded as the defining element of a 'Nordic' art:

[h]ere we have the decisive formula for the whole medieval North. Here are the elements, which later on, as we shall show, culminate in Gothic. The need for empathy of this inharmonious people does not take the nearest-at-hand path to the organic, because the harmonious motion of the organic is not sufficiently expressive for it, it needs rather that uncanny pathos which attached to the animation of the inorganic.¹²

Worringer thus pitches a non-naturalist art of design against Renaissance humanism with its emphasis on perspective, psychology and mimesis. In the account of his conversation with Grimm and Ruwoldt, Beckett is clearly intrigued by all of this and no wonder, for it speaks directly to his own aesthetic concerns as they had evolved over the previous ten years. The dichotomy in Beckett's thought between, on the one hand, immanence, affect and vitalistic process, and on the other, notions of autonomy, totality and stillness was immediately translatable into Worringer's opposition between empathy and abstraction.

Beckett goes on to remark on Grimm and Ruwoldt's enthusiasm for the collection of Egyptian sculpture in Berlin, and this enthusiasm too likely registers the influence of Worringer's *Egyptian Art* of 1927.¹³ Indeed, when Beckett himself spends a considerable amount of time in the Ägyptische Sammlung in the Neuen Museum, he makes a point of noting the non-naturalistic, still and timeless qualities of the work.¹⁴ This is entirely in keeping with Worringer's position on Egyptian art as the purest form of abstraction. Later, when Beckett comments on Ernst Barlach's sculpture *Sterben* that it has the right smile for the dead, he is recognizing Barlach's use of the celebrated 'archaic smile' associated with Egyptian tomb art.¹⁵ We will see Beckett repeating his position

¹² Worringer (1953), p. 118.

¹³ Worringer (1928).

¹⁴ GD., 7.1.37.

¹⁵ GD., 16.3.37.

on Egyptian mortuary sculpture in a key account of the abstraction of medieval German sculpture later.

Worringer was the most popular and widely read of the German-language art historians, and his thought can be detected in several other encounters with paintings, artists, collectors and critics. After a lecture on archaeology in Hamburg, Beckett described the geometrical patterning on a funerary vase in terms of the 'dread of empty space'. This is a version of Worringer's 'spiritual dread of space', his view that 'primitive man' assembled abstract images in order to organize an external space experienced as threatening and chaotic.¹⁶ It is impossible to say if Beckett picked this term up from the lecture, from other conversations he was having, or if he was already aware of Worringer even before coming to Germany. In any event, its presence in the diaries confirms that the concepts and vocabulary of contemporary German art discourse are making themselves felt right from the start of his trip.

There are two main strands to this discourse, each having its origins in neo-Kantianism, and Worringer's *Empathy and Abstraction* combines both in its title. One strand attempts to account for the ways in which the beholder fills out or otherwise colours the abstract forms that define the work of art. This more 'sensual' tradition is subjective, participatory and immersive. It sees art as anthropomorphic and empathetic, and begins with Robert Vischer, but can be traced right back to the German Romantics. Worringer is clearly influenced by such ideas, but as we have seen his use of the notion of empathy is in tense relation with the competing idea of abstraction. Where empathy encourages identification with the artwork and the world, abstraction dramatizes separation. This approach draws on a second Kantian lineage, the highly formal analysis of the artwork as autonomous object. It is a tradition we can associate with Heinrich Wölfflin, Alöis Riegl and, in less academic vein, Worringer again. The distinction between the two positions was reflected, significantly, in a tension between the two camps to which Beckett was introduced in Hamburg: that of the family of the curator and art critic Max Sauerlandt on the one hand, and on the other the collector Rosa Schapire's circle. Beckett records another collector, Helene Fera, saying that she found the atmosphere at Sauerlandt's too aesthetic, and too much infused by the *Einfühlung* [empathy] approach.¹⁷ There is a suggestion here that the alternative 'anti-aesthetic' notion of abstraction is preferred by the group that Beckett became closer to in Hamburg, and indeed recent scholarship

¹⁶ GD., 12.11.36. Worringer (1953), p. 16.

¹⁷ GD., 3.12.36.

has suggested as much.¹⁸ Significantly, Beckett admits to finding Sauerlandt's book tiresome, and this accords with the move away from broadly empathetic ideas that we saw in [Chapter 2](#).¹⁹ Indeed, as the diaries proceed, ideas compatible with Worringean abstraction, and the term itself, gain ascendancy over notions of empathy, although the latter is also in evidence.

Both Sauerlandt and Schapire were sometime students of Heinrich Wölfflin, the most influential of all the academic art historians working in the period. His core achievement, containing methodological innovations that are still part of art-historical practice, is found in his *Principles of Art* of 1915.²⁰ It was Wölfflin, more than anyone else, who steered art history away from the narrative-based anecdotal accounts. Instead his approach depends on two related methods. As Joan Hart describes them, these are 'the formal analysis of individual works of art and the comparison of two styles to determine their general characteristics'.²¹ One example of such comparison is the distinction between the linear and the painterly. In Renaissance painting, according to Wölfflin, figures are depicted individually, their outlines unbroken by others nearby, while in the Baroque figures often overlap, and so are seen in vigorous relation to each other. When the Hamburg painter Eduard Bargheer responds negatively to Beckett's interest in Pollaiuolo, he is very clearly drawing on Wölfflin by saying that the painter's figures are overly isolated and not treated dynamically in the manner of Titian.²² In other words, Pollaiuolo's work paints individuals in a linear fashion, isolating them, while Titian binds them together. Beckett's response to this is telling: his note attributes the idea to Bargheer's own intelligence, and hence he does not see the connection to Wölfflin. Yet he admits the justice of the remark, and approves of it. It makes sense to him because it conforms to the kind of formal examination, drawing on issues of framing, composition, figure and ground, that he himself routinely engages in. As we shall see, Bargheer's is a very important remark for Beckett, and he will remember it and return to it two months later in the course of a key formulation of his own.

Other art-historical influences that Beckett encounters in Germany are less securely academic. As Devin Fore points out, in mid-to-late 1930s Germany the notion of the physiognomic as a mode of interpretation was

¹⁸ See Behr (2011), pp. 99–124, p. 109. ¹⁹ GD., 27.11.36. ²⁰ Wölfflin (1932).

²¹ Hart (1982), pp. 292–300, p. 292.

²² GD., 26.11.36. Beckett also relays the conversation to MacGreevy: 'Bargheer is very violent and intelligent & anatomical. Pollaiuolo, whom I mentioned, he analyzed with ... justness and sensitiveness'. Letter to MacGreevy, 28 November 1937, *LSB*, pp. 386–394, p. 387.

widely practised amongst cultural critics.²³ The term was used to mean the analysis of the individual's tendency to project the human body, and particularly the structure of the face, onto its surroundings as a mode of interpretation. It is a form of empathy: Wölfflin's argument that buildings are engaged with physiognomically, with windows taken as eyes, etc., is a good example.²⁴ The term can also be found in Benjamin and Adorno.²⁵ In some hands this could degenerate into the literal interpretation of faces, however. It is now generally agreed, for example, that Wilhelm Fraenger's *Matthias Grünewald in seinen Werken. Ein physiognomischer Versuch*, is a deeply flawed and impressionistic work.²⁶ Yet this was one of the books Beckett bought in Germany, and it clearly intrigued him. Indeed Fraenger's highly literary text is extraordinarily suggestive when placed alongside Beckett's reading of certain paintings in the diaries, and in particular his attempts to relate form to psychological conflict. Although he studied under Wölfflin, Fraenger's method is often akin to that of the traditional connoisseur, comparing elements in different paintings in order to establish provenance. Hence, one of his arguments in the book, based on superficial resemblances, is that the face of St. Sebastian in the Isenheim altar is the same person, a young companion of Grünewald's, also found in a portrait by Hans Holbein the younger and in another by Phillip Uffenbach.²⁷ Fraenger further contends, again with little justification, that Grünewald himself appears as one of the figures in a mocking of Christ and as the centurion in the Basel *Crucifixion*. Beckett often engages in this kind of activity too, relating faces in one painting to those in another by the same artist, which might account for his attraction to the book.²⁸

More interestingly for our purposes, Fraenger also indulges in an idiosyncratic structural analysis of attitude and gesture, with certain stances or expressions understood as strictly denoting emotions. Thus, for example, the diagonal head-pose in Grünewald's self-portrait is read antithetically as the representation of a defining psychological tension: 'impetuous advance' is expressed by the raised chin, while the tilting back of the head represents 'precipitous escape'.²⁹ Fraenger then takes this as a kind of template that he finds throughout Grünewald's work. The same pose is discerned in face after face, and understood as a combination of 'conflicting feelings,

²³ Fore (2012). ²⁴ See Bohde (2012), pp. 117–140.

²⁵ See Ogden (2010), pp. 57–73. See also Schwarz (2005), pp. 137–235. ²⁶ Fraenger (1983).

²⁷ See Fraenger (1983), pp. 162–167.

²⁸ See, for example, the references to Signorelli, El Greco and del Sarto in the letter to MacGreevy of 18 January 1937, *LSBr*, pp. 426–438, pp. 428–429.

²⁹ Fraenger (1983), p. 195.

impulses or willpower' ('Gefühlen, Triebenoder, Willenskräften').³⁰ Thus, for example, the isometrically tilted faces of John of the Cross and the Magdalene in the crucifixion panel of the Isenheim altar are read to argue that Grünewald's work turns on a 'mixed sensation' ('Mischempfindung') of grief and ecstasy.³¹

As we shall see in a moment, in the diaries Beckett also engages in this kind of analysis, combining structural analysis and the empathic identification of psychological dispositions. That he was already doing so *before* he bought Fraenger's text, however, suggests that the combination is another manifestation of the deep-seated *agon* between objective formalism and subjective fusion that is the motor of his aesthetic thought. The Grünewald book thus legitimates and gives momentum to a practice that is already in place, becoming useful as a model that allowed Beckett to continue to explore his own antithetical tendencies towards abstraction and realism, structure and psychology. But the clear affinities between the two men's approach is important for another wider reason. It suggests just how pervasive the influence of a dualist model of formalist reading coupled with speculation on interiority was in the Germany of the period.

Beckett's own combination of the formalist and the psychological is evident in his reading of Dürer. On 13 March 1937 he examines the antinomies of the latter's *Four Apostles*, contrasting John and Peter's open book and key Paul and Mark's closed book and sword.³² Later he returns to the painting and charts a series of further oppositions, including passive and active, warm and cool, eyes and eyelessness. But the earliest examples of this tendency to work with formal, antithetical readings all centre on the work of the Expressionist painter Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. Thus Beckett writes of the latter's *Frauenkopf* that it evinces a paradoxical tension that is somehow also a resolution, and of the same painter's *Patroklusturm in Soest* that it combines 'prayer and angry consternation'.³³ The opposition in the latter case between the reflective, devotional practice of prayer and an altogether more confused and extreme composite emotion is characteristic. Reprising the main terms of his description of the *Frauenkopf*, Beckett also records a conversation where Ballmer criticizes Schmidt-Rottluff's painting for the tension that Beckett admires. Beckett sets out his response using German terminology, saying that a *Spannung* [tension] can be a *Gronung* [resolution] too.³⁴ Beckett could not be more explicit about the necessity to preserve tension, to emphasize contrast and

³⁰ Ibid. ³¹ Ibid. ³² GD., 29. 3.37. ³³ GD., I.II.36. ³⁴ GD., 22.II.36.

juxtaposition.³⁵ Finally, after a meeting with Wilhelm Grimm, Beckett notes the painter's impatience with the *violence* of Schmidt-Rottluff.³⁶ Shortly afterwards, the statement returns in Beckett's own antithetical form, as he writes of his admiration for painters of violence *and* calm. Once again this clearly demonstrates the way Beckett converts a sense of formal opposition into an emotional one, moving between structural and psychological readings in a manner that is highly typical.

The most important of such readings describes the encounter with Giorgione's *Self-Portrait* in the Herzog-Anton-Ulrich Museum in Brunswick in early December 1936. Beckett's response in his first visit is couched in the usual series of oppositions: 'expression at once intense and patient, anguished and strong'.³⁷ Returning two days later he reaches for a key term: the expression in the *Self-Portrait* now displays an '*antithesis* of mind and sense, knitted brows, anguished eyes'.³⁸ Here it is as if the portrait instantiates precisely the modernist notion of a 'sensuous intelligence', holding together in a single image the conceptual work of the understanding and the passion of pure visual sensation. As we saw in [Chapter 1](#), Giorgione is a touchstone for literary modernists like Pater, and Beckett's response to the painting seems, at least initially, securely in this tradition. Yet it is the undecidable emotional tenor of the central single image of the face that attracts Beckett to Giorgione's portrait, rather than its registration of an authentically integrated experience. Here we can begin to outline the distance between a broadly modernist poetics of sensuous intellection and Beckett's detection of an 'antithesis of mind and sense'. It is the drama of the tension between concept and intuition that Beckett admires in the image rather than its overcoming. The tension brings about its own resolution as Beckett's comments on Schmitt-Rottluff's *Frauenkopf* have it, and this is true of the Giorgione too.

The centrality of this relationship between life, experience and intuition on the one hand and mind or concept on the other appears elsewhere in the diaries in less obvious and more complex ways. A good example is an entry from November 1936, after a visit to Karl Ballmer's studio. Beckett was deeply impressed by Ballmer and his work. The following comes in response to his *Kopf in Rot*:

[w]onderful red Frauenkopf, skull earth and sky. I think of Monadologie & my Vulture. Would not occur to me to call this painting abstract. A metaphysical concrete. Not nature convention, but its source, fountain

³⁵ Ibid. ³⁶ GD., 26.11.36. ³⁷ GD., 8.12.36. Nixon (2011a), p. 143.

³⁸ GD., 10.12.36 My italics. Nixon (2011a), p. 143.

of Erscheinung. Fully a posteriori painting. Object not exploited to illustrate an idea, as in say Léger or Baumeister, but primary. The communication exhausted by the optical experience that is its motive and content. Anything further is by the way. Thus Leibniz, monadologie, Vulture, are by the way. Extraordinary stillness.³⁹

The persistence of a broadly Kantian set of assumptions in the diaries is reflected in Beckett's reference to *Kopf in Rot* as 'fully a posteriori painting'. Here the Kantian epistemological distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* forms of knowledge is evoked. In stressing the latter, Beckett is suggesting that Ballmer's art is not mediated by the concept, but rather establishes something of immediate experience. There seems something here, in other words, of the modernist ideal of an authentic, immersive contact with the real. Yet the fact that we remain within a transcendental vocabulary, even as the passage seemingly contests Kant through a challenge to the notion of the concept, is significant. When Beckett describes Ballmer's painting, marvellously, as a 'fountain of Erscheinung [phenomena]', he again sees it as a kind of immersive gush of phenomena, one that the beholder encounters as pure experience. Yet equally, through the use of the German word, the Kantian distinction between such phenomena and a primordial, inaccessible noumena is preserved. Significantly, Beckett recalls the Ballmer description in *Molloy*, but this time with an entirely negative valency: 'the noise of things bursting, merging, avoiding one another, assails me on all sides, my eyes search in vain for two things alike, each pinpoint of the skin screams a different message, I drown in the spray of phenomena'.⁴⁰

There are other references in the Ballmer description which suggest a distinct philosophical resistance to ideas of a vital, empathic experience of the artwork. Beckett begins the passage by summoning up his early poetry, and its concerns with landscape. Indeed he describes Ballmer's painting by quoting, with slight modification, the second line of his poem 'The Vulture' before introducing the title of the said poem alongside that of Leibniz's great metaphysical treatise of 1714. 'The Vulture' begins: 'Dragging his hunger through the sky/of my skull shell of sky and earth',

³⁹ GD., 26.11.36. Nixon (2011a), p. 156. Although Beckett is dismissive of Sauerlandt's *Die Kunst der Letzten 30 Jahre* and especially its 'empathic' treatment of Ballmer, as Carola Veit has pointed out, the reference here to 'optical experience' comes close to the latter's assertion that in Ballmer 'the phenomenal reality of an optical experience (perhaps an invented optical experience) becomes viewable sensation', Sauerlandt (n.d.), p. 186. See Veit, 'Beckett's Hamburger Künstler Gespräche' in Geising et al. (2007), pp. 102–117, p. 110.

⁴⁰ Beckett (1979), p. 102.

setting up a correspondence between inside and outside that is also reflected in the diary's reference to the *Monadology*.⁴¹ For Beckett reads the Ballmer painting as an illustration of Leibniz's understanding of the relationship between the universe and the monad (understood here as the self) as one of an agreement between a perception within the monad/self/shell and the world/sky/earth outside it. Without going into great detail, it is important to note at this point that Leibniz sees such a correspondence not as an actual relation, but rather a harmony maintained by divine will. We will be returning to this aspect of Leibniz's thought later on several occasions. Suffice it to say for the moment that the monadic model of the relation between subject and object is emphatically not a modernist one of fusion, quite the opposite, and this is why Beckett is attracted to it.

Beckett calls *Kopf in Rot* 'a metaphysical concrete' and in a 28 November letter to McGreevy he is pleased enough with the phrase to use it again, this time while comparing Ballmer to 'some moods of the late Picasso', and in particular the monumental *Figure au bord de la Mer*, which he saw with McGreevy at the great Picasso retrospective of 1932 in Paris.⁴² It seems that Picasso's work of the late 1920s was on Beckett's mind at this point. On 19 November he refers approvingly to Picasso's painting of 'the inanimate', and on 4 December in Luneberg described one of the eighteenth-century copperplated cranes on the river as Picasso-like.⁴³ The specific reference must be to the *Bathers* series that Picasso painted in 1929, with Beckett comparing the crane's squat body and long tapering arm to the elongated necks and barrel-like torsos of Picasso's figures. The latter are clearly themselves related to the set of more sculptural paintings to which *Figure au bord de la Mer* belongs.

An analysis of what the Ballmer painting shares with the Picasso image, and how they differ, can help us assess the conflicting intellectual currents at work in Beckett's description of the former. As with the Ballmer, Picasso's image is far from being abstract, but neither is it naturalistic. Instead, similarly to *Kopf in Rot*, it is an attempt to condense and exaggerate certain aspects of a single human figure. Yet there are also significant differences. Ballmer's approach is a familiar late-Expressionist one, relying on simplified form and an intensification of facture and colour to produce vivid and immediate affects. Beckett translates this into his own philosophical terms, when he says the Ballmer is not 'nature convention but its source'. In other words, the jaded conceptual frameworks through which

⁴¹ See Beckett (2009), p. 13.

⁴² Letter to MacGreevy, 28 November 1937, *LSBr*, pp. 386–394, p. 387.

⁴³ *GD.*, 4.12.36.



Figure 3.1 Pablo Picasso, *Nude Standing by the Sea*, 1929, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, © 2017. Image copyright The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence

everyday experience is filtered are bypassed in this painting, so that perception is renovated, made new. To this extent, Beckett's approbation does seem to conform to the modernist agenda of direct contact with the real, with empathy and experience.

Figure au bord de la Mer, a much greater painting, is very different in style. Picasso's work of this period has been well described by Elizabeth Cowling: 'the character of these ... paintings is determined by the differing *substances* and textures they evoke – flesh, plaster, stone, bone – and the unifying factor is that all the figures are simultaneously human and *non-human*'.⁴⁴ Cowling's identification of stone and bone as key components chimes with Beckett's increasing attraction to tropes of

⁴⁴ Cowling (2004), p. 516. My italics.

inhumanity, as in his comments on Cezanne set out in [Chapter 2](#). Indeed his own comparison of the copperplated crane to a Picasso demonstrates that he was very much alive to these aspects of the painter's work.

When Beckett talks about the 'metaphysical concrete' it is such qualities that he has in mind: substance, texture, an emphasis on immediacy. But this is obviously not the lush, sensuous, empathic immediacy that *Kopf in Rot* seems calculated to induce. *Figure au bord de la Mer* emphasizes the negative side of Beckett's search for an image of experience beyond the concept or the intellect. He responds to this moment of Picasso's painting because it speaks of a humanity reduced to an object amongst other objects, an inorganic, unintelligible, inanimate entity. It is as if the desire to go beyond the Kantian apparatus has short-circuited the relation to the world completely, so that pure perception becomes a kind of living death. It is here too that we can see the attractions of Leibniz and his assertion that there is absolutely no direct relation between monad and world. The Ballmer and Picasso paintings might thus be thought of as recto and verso, two sides of the same image, with the Ballmer still retaining a trace of the modernist possibility of authentic experience beyond the concept, while the Picasso suggests the risks of the loss of the human entailed in any such attempt.

The kind of opposition between immersive experience and the inhuman that we find in Beckett's thoughts on the 'metaphysical concrete' also emerge in his relationship with the painting of Franz Marc. After reading a little of Marc's *Briefe, Aufzeichnungen und Aphorismen*, he notes the following:

[i]nteresting note in Marc, i.e. subject, predicate, object relations in painting. He says: paint the predicate of the living. Picasso has that of the inanimate. By that he appears to mean not the relation between the subject and object but the alienation (my nomansland).⁴⁵

The relevant passage from Marc reads as follows,

[w]ho says the doe feels the world to be cubistic? It's the doe that feels, therefore the landscape must be doe-like. That is its predicate. The artistic logic of Picasso, Kandinsky, Delauney, Burljick etc. is perfect. They don't see the doe and they don't care. They project their inner world, which is the noun of the sentence. Naturalism contributes the object. The predicate, the most difficult and basically the most important part is rendered but rarely. The predicate is the most important part of a thoughtful sentence.

⁴⁵ GD., 19.11.36. See Tønning (2007), p. 126.

The noun is the premise. The object is a negligible echo: it makes the thought specific, and banal. I could paint a picture called *The Doe*. Pisanello has painted them. How infinitely more subtle must the painter's sensibility be in order to paint that! The Egyptians have done it. *The Rose*: Manet painted it. *The Rose is in Bloom*: who has painted the blooming of the rose? The Indians did it. They gave the predicate.⁴⁶

In effect Marc distinguishes between three modes of representation: Picasso and the Cubists paint subjectively while the naturalist paints objectively. Marc himself, by contrast, identifies with a painting of the predicate, which he associates with that which is neither subject or object, or is a fusion of the two. His rich, hallucinatory colours, the use of contour to dissolve figure and ground, the adoption of a shallow grid that unifies the picture plane: these tactics are the means by which he attempts to paint what he calls the 'Doe-like landscape', the landscape encountered as if filtered through the doe's life-world. But Marc's idea of the predicate goes further than simply suggesting a desire to adopt the perspective of the doe. His emphasis on 'the blooming of the rose', rather than the rose itself, partakes of a vitalist *Lebensphilosophie* that is the German equivalent of Bergsonism. In his comment Beckett picks up on this, associating Marc's work with the imperative to 'paint the predicate of the *living*', a word that Marc himself does not use.

It is in opposition to Marc's vitalism that Beckett posits Picasso and 'the inanimate' (again a term not found in Marc). Although it has been argued that it is Marc's 'painting of the predicate' that Beckett describes as 'not the relation between subject and object but the alienation', the structure of the passage also suggests that Picasso's work is being described by Beckett in such terms.⁴⁷ In other words, according to Beckett, if Marc 'paints the predicate of the living', Picasso does the same for 'the inanimate'. This is more in keeping with both Marc's work – which does not seem 'alienated' in any way, quite the opposite – and with the Picasso paintings, such as *Figure au bord de la Mer*, about which Beckett had been so recently thinking. The implication is that where Marc attempts to capture the pure immersive process of a deer's organic relation with the landscape, Picasso paints instead the life-world of non-human, inorganic things. If this reading is accepted, then the identification of Beckett's own 'nomansland' is with Picasso rather than Marc, and this statement is a definitive

⁴⁶ Marc (1920), I, pp. 121–122. See Marc (1992), pp. 178–179.

⁴⁷ See Tonning (2007), pp. 125–127.

abandonment of modernist empathic experience in favour of something stranger and ultimately much more important for Beckett's development.

On 28 November, visiting Karl Kluth's studio, there is another reference to Marc and his deer that further distances Beckett from ideas of empathy and experience. After looking at Kluth's painting, Beckett resorts to German, describing it as a *Gegensatz* of the natural and the human, continuing 'I say his landscape is as there were no eyes left in the world' and going on to evoke Berkeley as a means of distinguishing Kluth from Marc.⁴⁸ '*Gegensatz*' can be translated as contrast, antithesis and conflict, and so here we have the signature formal tension that Beckett values in painting asserting itself once more. In this short description the appeal to such tension is all the more striking due to the antithetical, mutually exclusive ways Beckett describes Kluth's image. It is at once a completely materialist landscape, one that exists in the absence of human perception ('no eyes left in the world'), and yet it is also a Berkeleyan one, implying an idealist landscape, existing only as, and for, perception. This paradoxical description, undecidably poised between pure virtual image and absolute materiality, demonstrates again the core tension that drives Beckett's aesthetic thought, but it is important to note that it emerges here in reaction to the kind of vitalism that he sees in Marc. Beckett himself confirms this, when he says that the Kluth painting is *beyond* the Deer-landscapes of Marc. Indeed throughout the rest of the diaries, Beckett's reactions to Marc are entirely negative.⁴⁹

Here we get a sense of just what is at stake in Beckett's habitual insistence on *Gegensatz*, *Spannung* and antithesis in his treatment of painting in the diaries. Marc's 'painting of the predicate' remains within a vitalist modernist paradigm with which Beckett is becoming increasingly impatient. It is a painting that claims to access the non-human with no formal registration of the Kantian impasse facing such a claim, that of how the non-anthropomorphic world can be represented in a way that remains intelligible to the human. Rather than attempting to paint a liminal space of becoming, as in Marc, Beckett sees Kluth's painting registering the impasse through its formal undecidability. Indeed by reading a single, unified image in two entirely antithetical ways, Beckett's description itself performs and incites the kind of tension that he values

⁴⁸ GD., 25.11.36. See Marie Luise Syring, "'Morning with Durrieu bei Kluth with a bottle of Rum': Samuel Beckett und die deutsche Kunst" in Fischer-Seidel and Fries-Dieckmann (2005), pp. 95–111, p. 109.

⁴⁹ See GD., 7.2.36.

in painting. His ekphrasis creates an impossible image, one that inscribes the *Gegensatz* between nature and the human in mutually exclusive, yet co-present terms. Beckett is clear elsewhere that he found Kluth's painting in general poor, and no doubt it is more useful to see the real address of his description here as an art that Beckett himself is in the process of formulating. A germ of that art is also visible in Beckett's reading of Schmidt-Rottluff's *Patroklusturm in Soest* as an image of 'prayer and angry consternation'.⁵⁰ I want to return to this important idea of prayer, as it will form a major focus of the rest of this chapter, which will concentrate for the most part on Beckett's relationship with religious painting and sculpture. It will also allow us to reintroduce the figure of Leibniz, who will become key to Beckett's aesthetic over the coming years.

Beckett's *Whoroscope* notebook, which he took with him to Germany, contains an idea for a poem couched in terms that owe something to the *Monadology*: 'Luke XVI: Dives – Lazarus, prayer from virtual to actual in entelechy, or petites perception to apperceived in monad – poem'.⁵¹ The note proposes two sets of the oppositions, one ontological (referring to Leibniz's distinction between the virtual and the actual) and the other epistemological (referring to Leibniz's distinction between the confused, liminal *petit perceptions* and clear and distinct conceptual ideas). In the quotation, prayer seems to preside over, to mediate between, the terms of these oppositions. The introduction of the Dives story complicates this reading, however, and introduces an important note of despair. The core of the parable is to be found in Luke 16:26, where Abraham responds to Dives in Hades, as he begs for Lazarus in heaven to wet his tongue with water: 'between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not do so, and none may cross from there to us'. Beckett uses this chasm between heaven and hell, the gulf which prayer attempts to bridge, as an analogue for the separation between perceiving subject and object. But in the parable the prayer is not answered. To use Beckett's formal terms, the 'tension' in the opposition between Dives and Lazarus is never 'resolved'. The structure of Beckett's jotting displaces a Leibnizian metaphysical omnipotence with the subjective, earth-bound and (in the Dives parable at least) fundamentally failed appeal of prayer. In Germany, I suggest, this becomes Beckett's central image for both the production and interpretation of art.

⁵⁰ GD., 31.10.36. See Syring in Fischer-Seidel and Fries-Dieckmann (2005), p. 101.

⁵¹ UoR MS3000, 'Whoroscope Notebook', 21r. The note appears to have been written before the trip, however. Thanks to Mark Nixon for help with dating. See Nixon (2011a), p. 210, n. 14.

This association of prayer with poetry brings philosophy into contact with aesthetics and religion, and does so in a manner paradigmatic for the way Beckett's thinking will develop through the early months of 1937. The gap between virtual and actual, perception and conception is another iteration of the impasse between the human and the inhuman that haunts the diaries. This problem is worked out in the later months of the trip through reflections on German religious painting and sculpture, while visiting the great medieval cathedrals of Freiburg, Würzburg, Bamberg, Naumberg and Nuremberg. For Beckett's concern with how the art object can formally inscribe the limit-point between the human and the inhuman finds an obvious resource in religious imagery. In these churches Beckett's characteristically antithetical eye responds acutely to religious art's own oppositions of distance and intimacy, materialism and transcendence, earthly suffering and divine intervention. It is as if, in the absence of any personal religious faith or feeling, he is able to forensically examine the working of a set of images explicitly designed to provoke the modes of reflection and address that come under the name of prayer. Before we turn to religious art *per se*, however, there is an important early example of Beckett's association of art with prayer that we must attend to.

On 17 November 1936 Beckett visited the art collector Dr Rosa Schapire at her Hamburg apartment. Schapire was a collector of modern German painting, in particular the work of Schmidt-Rottluff, who painted several portraits of his patron, one of which Beckett spent some considerable time examining. In his account of their subsequent discussion Beckett explicitly links three things: the relationship of beholder to painting, the subject-object relation and, crucially, the notion of prayer: 'Twine subject-object round stem of art as prayer. New figure occurs as I speak. The art (picture) that is a prayer sets up prayer, releases prayer in onlooker.'⁵² Beckett had been entertaining the notion of art as prayer since the previous year at least, as demonstrated by a September 1935 letter to MacGreevy describing the kite-fliers in Hyde Park.⁵³ The passage from the diaries contains some subtle changes of emphasis, however. Beckett is particularly careful not to completely collapse the two sides of the relation between subject and object into the kind of pure immediacy associated with vitalism and modernist 'sensuous intellection'. There is a fine balance to the final sentence of the passage, where Beckett writes: 'the art (picture) that is a prayer sets up prayer, releases prayer in onlooker'. The verbs are

⁵² GD., 17.11.36. Nixon (2011a), p. 116.

⁵³ Letter to MacGreevy, 8 September 1935, *LSBr*, pp. 273–276.

working hard here: the artwork actively 'sets up' prayer/experience in the beholder, reaching in to directly command and configure his or her sensorium. And yet this is qualified by the addition of the much more passive second verb: the artwork also 'releases' prayer/experience. In order to be released in this way the experience must therefore *be already there*, at least in *potentia*. By attributing such a double movement to the artwork – a setting up and a releasing – Beckett preserves a distinction between the perceiver and the object perceived, so that in effect the notion of prayer covers two separate procedures. Crucially, and in line with the diaries' preoccupation with perception and aesthetic autonomy, the difference between these two procedures turns on how direct the communication is between artwork and beholder. If the artwork actively 'sets up' an experience, then it must be intervening directly into consciousness, and the relationship with the artwork is unmediated. This model of the image thus sees the artwork as a direct presentation of the world, in the manner of Bergson. On the other hand, if it releases an already existing experience, then there is no such direct relationship, and the experience rather activates existing forms and models of experience. This model of the artwork is closer to a Kantian sense of the artwork as a representation that stimulates the subjective free play of the faculties.

In effect, this opposition between the perceiver and the perceived preserves the Dives–Lazarus dichotomy and the impasse it exemplifies. Picture and perceiver remain on opposite sides of the gulf, and Beckett's suggestion that the artwork can reach across and actively 'set up' experience is balanced and qualified by the suggestion that it merely 'releases' an experience that is already there. But it is important to determine the exact nature of that experience. If we take Beckett's recourse to the parable of Dives seriously, with its insistence on the ultimately failed nature of prayer and Dives' continued suffering, then the experience of the beholder must be one of frustration and impossibility. This accords closely with what we have seen of Beckett's insistence on formal tension and undecidability in his analysis of Giorgione, Schmidt-Rottluff, Ballmer, Picasso, Kluth and others. For Beckett, it is becoming clear, an intrinsic quality of a successful artwork is that it frustrates, suspends or otherwise blocks interpretation. The metaphor of attention to an image as a failed prayer beautifully captures this dimension of the impossible in Beckett's aesthetic, as well as resonating with the ideas of alienation and suffering that also animate the Worringean notion of abstraction.

The key role of Leibniz's *Monadology* in relation to both prayer and the parable of Dives, as staged in the Whoroscope fragment, is that it enables

Beckett to ontologize this impossibility. Dives and Lazarus can be thought of as monads, and the 'chasm' or 'gulf' between them a result of their 'windowless' nature. In Leibniz's 'best of all possible worlds', Abraham would step in to mediate the chasm, bringing Dives and Lazarus into contact through divine agency. In the parable of Dives this does not happen, nor can it happen in Beckett's melancholy, secular metaphysics. For Beckett, the monad is intimately associated with the ruined, atomized, petrified landscape that he finds realized in Picasso's 'painting of the predicate of the inanimate' or Kluth's landscape beyond human perception. The monad is the basic unit of a strange abstract, inhuman terrain that is the opposite of the rich, empathic spaces that Marc's painting of *Lebensphilosophie* imagines. Increasingly, as the diaries continue, the artworks to which Beckett is attracted take on the hermetic, inorganic, concrete qualities of such landscapes. Indeed the artworks become monads themselves: their self-contained, highly wrought surfaces emphasizing a materialist, object-quality that withdraws from the viewer.⁵⁴ What Beckett called the 'alienation of subject from object' in Picasso's work and in his own registers this notion of the painting, sculpture or poem as materialist monad. Such an artwork is one that aspires to exist beyond the subjective beholder. Better still: the monadic artwork reduces the beholder to another object that is set alongside the artwork; the subject becomes an object amongst other objects. In this sense the autonomous artwork is the embodiment of the monadic quality of the world: it represents, instantiates, in its blind, closed quality, the primordial atomization of the world, and thereby expresses its truth. Prayer is Beckett's term for the apprehension of this truth. Or more accurately it is the failure of prayer, its unfulfillment in the face of the distant, 'disinterested', formally antithetical artwork, that is the means through which such truth is experienced.

One striking thing about Beckett's period in Germany is his increasing interest in medieval northern European painting and its legacy in recent German art.⁵⁵ First used as early as the late eighteenth century, the idea of a Northern Renaissance included both Netherlandish painting and

⁵⁴ My thinking here is indebted to Frederic Schwarz's comments on the Austrian art historian Hans Sedlmayr's Leibnizian treatment of the art object as a 'small world', and also Christopher Wood's essay 'Riegl's Mache', in which he demonstrates the way Alöis Riegl treats late Roman artefacts as monadic in a manner that has deep affinities with Adorno's notion of the monadic artwork in *Aesthetic Theory* (a book which was to have been dedicated to Beckett). See Schwarz (2005), pp. 164–165. Wood (2004), pp. 155–172.

⁵⁵ For an introduction to the concept of the Northern Renaissance and its history see Moxey (1995), p. 392.

German art.⁵⁶ Beckett's early engagement with the former can be vividly seen on 17 December 1936 when, at the Deutsches Museum in Berlin, he goes directly to the Flemish School.⁵⁷ Beckett often supports such scrutiny with scholarship: he twice makes a note of the title of Émile Renders' 'Solution du probleme van der Weyden, Flémalle, Campin', a now famous book that definitively proved the anonymous Master of Flémalle to be Rogier van der Weyden rather than Robert Campin.⁵⁸ The next day he marvels at the crucifixions of Albrecht Altdorfer and Hans Multscher.⁵⁹ This concern with early German representations of the Passion will grow stronger and stronger. By late January, Beckett leaves to go to the Kaiser Friedrich to examine Italian paintings, but finds himself drawn instead to the German work in the Deutsches Museum, where he studies Multscher and Witz.⁶⁰

Beckett's interest in Northern art is also evident in his purchase of a series of pamphlets, one of which, by Alfred Stange, was on *Lucas Moser und Hans Multscher*, while two others were by Max Friedländer, one on *Die Niederlandischen Manieresten* and another on the German artist Martin Schongauer.⁶¹ On 29 March 1937 Beckett notes how interesting he finds the latter two.⁶² Friedländer was the key early authority on Netherlandish painting. It was largely as a product of his knowledge, research and curatorial zeal that it came, in the early part of the century, to be accepted as work that rivalled the Italian Renaissance in depth of sophistication and breadth of innovation. Friedländer argued that Netherlandish art and German art were essentially continuous, and in this he was typical. As Keith Moxey puts it: 'German scholars of Friedländer's generation [saw] Netherlandish culture within the parameters of what was considered the broader concept of German identity.'⁶³ Moxey also mentions Max Dvořák and Worringer as writers who were attempting to wrest prestige from the Italian Renaissance, and transfer it to what they saw as a broadly Northern or 'Nordic' aesthetic. Beckett's diaries soon begin to register the stylistic congruity at least: looking at Konrad Witz's work, for example, he thought it very Flemish.⁶⁴ The key figures in this newly constructed medieval renaissance were securely German, however: Dürer, Cranach and Grünewald in the top rank, as well as the less well-known figures Beckett himself singles out, like Multscher, Schongauer, Altdorfer

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* ⁵⁷ GD., 17.12.36. ⁵⁸ Renders (1931). GD., 18.12.36 and 13.1.37.

⁵⁹ GD., 18.12.36. ⁶⁰ GD., 21.1.37.

⁶¹ Friedländer (1921); Friedländer (1922). Stange (1922). ⁶² GD., 29.3.37.

⁶³ Moxey (2001), pp. 25–26. ⁶⁴ GD., 21.1.37.

and Witz. Major sculptors such as Veit Stoss and Tilman Riemenschneider fare less well in the diaries, but as we shall see, Beckett has an enormous interest in and appreciation of some of their anonymous predecessors. Later periods of German painting interest him much less. As he puts it: 'What is there at all between the high succession about mid. 16th century ... + the Romantics ... a dreadful two centuries.'⁶⁵

The development of Beckett's interest in this period of German art was undoubtedly influenced by his constant contact, throughout his trip, with German art historians, critics, curators and collectors. Several recommended that he visit the acknowledged centres of late medieval and early modern German painting and sculpture, such as Nuremberg.⁶⁶ Many of the artists he met were interested in Worringer's and Wölfflin's arguments for the existence of the Northern Gothic as a style, and this concept, and the older and more academic idea of a Northern Renaissance, had much in common. The Expressionists of the earlier years of the century, drawing deeply on Worringer, saw themselves firmly within such a Germanic tradition, and at odds with both recent French art and the Italian Renaissance. As Kirchner had put it: 'How radically different are German and Latin artistic creations! The German creates his form out of his inner vision ... For the Latin beauty lies in appearance.'⁶⁷ In the 1930s this tradition of German painting was widely seen as including the whole of Northern Europe, including Scandinavia and the Netherlands. When Beckett calls Nolde and Munch 'Norderin' in style, or argues that Rembrandt's painting is a Nordic version of Italian psychological depiction, he indicates his own investment in this discourse of a distinctively Northern art and the North–South binary it relies upon.⁶⁸

Grünewald was the most important artistic model in the 1930s, both for the general notion of the Northern Gothic, and for the Expressionists and their legatees. The crucifixion panels of his Isenheim altar were particularly prized. In part this was because of the altar's location at Colmar, in the disputed territory of Alsace-Lorraine, a fact which conveniently allowed German exceptionalism to be allied with anti-French sentiment. As Ann Stieglitz has pointed out, the revised 1919 edition of Worringer's *Formprobleme der Gotik*, for example, presented Grünewald's work as the absolute epitome of both Expressionistic *innerlichkeit* and the Gothic spirit

⁶⁵ GD., 28.12.36. ⁶⁶ See, for example, GD., 23.1.37.

⁶⁷ See Will Grohmann's comments on the essentially German nature of Die Brücke at GD., 2.2.37. Kirchner is quoted from Weikorp (2011), p. 3.

⁶⁸ GD., 15.1.37; GD., 10.2.37.

of the German nation.⁶⁹ In addition to this, Grünewald benefited from being compared to Dürer, who was increasingly being seen as a figure compromised by his cosmopolitanism. According to Wölfflin: 'Beside Grünewald's abundances and elemental force Dürer's artistry appears to be one-sided, sometimes almost scholarly and academic, and his cult of Italianate form seems to have undermined his inborn German character in a fatal way'.⁷⁰

Beckett bought Fraenger's book on Grünewald in January 1937, and his journey through the art-historical centres of Southern Germany seems to have had Colmar as its ultimate destination.⁷¹ Thus in Dresden on 16 February, speaking of Giorgione, Beckett compares the Venetian painter's relationship with the cathedral of Castelfranco, where his Madonna hangs, to Grünewald's with Colmar.⁷² This statement is important for two reasons. First, it associates Giorgione, a cardinal figure for Beckett as we have seen, with Grünewald, indicating how important the latter has become. Second, it makes clear the importance of seeing the altar in its context, a significant point when we remember Beckett's notion of art as prayer. On 17 February, the day following the parallel with Giorgione, Beckett makes a list of the paintings falsely ascribed to the German painter. The day after that he notes that he has seen four paintings by him. He also consults H. A. Schmid's monograph, published in two volumes between 1907 and 1911, the first on the painter.⁷³

Schmid established the enduring terms of Grünewald's reception in Germany, seeing him, as Keith Moxey describes it, as a 'quintessentially German spirit' who 'united late Gothic art with that of the Baroque, thus ignoring or circumventing the "foreign" (i.e. Italian) Renaissance'.⁷⁴ By the time Beckett gets to Munich, however, and arrives for the first time at the Alte Pinakothek, he notes that he goes straight to the Italians, past the Grünewald, and stays there.⁷⁵ This at once indicates Beckett's continued interest in the painter, and a certain weariness with the relentless promotion of German art against the values of the Italian Renaissance. Certainly his opposition here between Germany and Italy hints at a grasp of the political and institutional forces that were grinding away beneath the

⁶⁹ Stieglitz (1989), pp. 87–103; see also Moxey (2004), pp. 750–763.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Moxey (2004), p. 752. Wölfflin (1971), p. 10.

⁷¹ For example, Beckett records the following itinerary, as recommended by Will Grohmann: Bamberg, Würzburg, Naümburg, Regensberg, Munich, Karlsruhe, Strassburg [Colmar]. GD., 11.2.37.

⁷² GD., 16.2.37

⁷³ Schmid (1907 and 1911).

⁷⁴ Moxey (2004), p. 751.

⁷⁵ GD., 8.3.37.

aesthetic choices offered to him. Indeed he never actually makes it to Colmar, finishing his German trip in Munich.

Even so, there can be no doubt about Beckett's interest in Grünewald. As mentioned earlier this interest was shared by the Expressionists. In 1928 Friedrich Haak had called the earlier painter the 'sworn companion and patron saint' of the movement, and one can readily see why.⁷⁶ Expressionism's deep interest in religious art (particularly in the cases of Schmidt-Rottluff, Nolde and Barlach, three artists that Beckett particularly admired) brought with it a profound admiration for the master of Colmar. As Peter Selz has it: 'young artists recognized in Grünewald the fervent religious faith for which many of them had been searching'.⁷⁷ Recognizing this affinity provides another context for Beckett's concern with art and prayer while in Germany. Medieval devotional painting, whether the small portable diptyches originating in the Netherlands or the large altarpiece, were particular reference points for the Expressionists, whose work, as we have seen, is a constant presence in the diaries. Such religious images answered to the *topoi* of suffering and transcendence so characteristic of the Expressionist sensibility. In addition, religious imagery was thought to distinguish the revered Northern Renaissance from the Italians, where Classical themes were equally if not more important than Biblical ones. Beckett's diaries too continually return to religious images, most regularly scenes from the Passion, such as the picture of the Mary with red eyes that he describes on 13 January.⁷⁸ Beckett's mention of the convention of the bloodshot eyes signifies that this is an image of the Mother of Sorrows: Mary's eyes are red from crying, as she contemplates the death of her son on the cross. Such devices were intended to promote an intensely personal relationship between image and viewer, one that catalysed private meditation, reflection and prayer. Dirck Bouts, a painter in whom Beckett became especially interested, specialized in these small devotional pictures of the sorrowful Mary, usually in a diptych with an image of Jesus as the Man of Sorrows. These images were personal and portable, designed for intimate solitary engagement in a private chapel or chamber.

In his lectures on the Isenheim Altarpiece, published in 1983, Fraenger argues that Scripture was not enough to satisfy the Christian's need for inner contemplation; images were necessary.⁷⁹ He is referring to something similar to the Netherlandish devotional practices in which Dirck Bouts' pictures were used, but his emphasis is on a more public

⁷⁶ Haak (1928), 11. Quoted in Moxey (2004), p. 754.

⁷⁸ GD., 13.1.37.

⁷⁹ Fraenger (1983), p. 10.

⁷⁷ Selz (1957), p. 17.

and institutional activity. Grünewald's panels at Colmar were originally planned for the hospital chapel of the order of St Anthony, a fraternity charged with the care of the sick, in particular those suffering from St Anthony's Fire, a very painful disease of the limbs.⁸⁰ The commission was for a painting suitable for members of such a congregation, and the painter clearly chose to create an image of the Crucifixion that emphasized the continuity between Christ's suffering and that of the Order's patients. Thus the painting has a very particular purpose: it allows patients to understand and ascribe meaning to their own suffering, through aligning it with Christ's. Beckett seems to have understood and been moved by this idea. Although, as mentioned earlier, he did not reach Isenheim, he did visit a similar institution in Nuremberg and, in a rare event for the period, he wrote a poem:

I wish I were an old man
 or an old woman
 half & half
~~or an old hermaphrodite~~
~~if hermaphrodites live to be old~~
 only old old as a crutch
 with a room off the big yard
 of the Holy Ghost Spital in Nürnberg
 When the sun shines at midday on Adam Kraft's
 Big black stone Christ Crucified
 But not on the repentant thief
 Nor the unrepentant⁸¹

Beckett's treatment of the central image of Adam Kraft's 'Big Black stone' sculpture of the crucifixion is instructive. The poem reverses a Biblical source, by referring to the sun shining at midday rather than, as in Mark 15:33, falling into eclipse: 'When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land.' It is true that it is only on Christ that the sun shines, rather than the thieves, whose sculptures stand separately in the corners of the Spital's courtyard. Yet the desire to be present at the precise moment of illumination imagines a potential relationship between beholder and divine image which seems, initially at least, to conform to conventional piety, and more particularly to the notion of the religious image as devotional aid. Further, the implicit assimilation of the 'old . . . crutch' to the cross suggests the key notion of identification between Christ and the sick about which such institutional images, as with Grünewald's altar at Isenheim, turn.

⁸⁰ See Hayum (1989), pp. 13–52.

⁸¹ GD., 2.3.37. Nixon (2011a), p. 117.

It cannot be denied that this text seems a sketch or fragment rather than a finished poem.⁸² But its virtue as an example of Beckett's ekphrastic practice is threefold: first, its clear valorization of sickness and suffering; second, its juxtaposition of image and beholder; and third, the characteristic way it evokes a further set of dualities in staging the relation with the image. Amongst these dualities we might include man and woman; human and divine; room and yard; black stone and sunlight; repentant and unrepentant thief. The lines concerning the hermaphrodite also suggest a counter-current of resolved or sublated opposition. The fact that these lines are cancelled, however, while the starker *agon* of the 'half-and-half' is allowed to stand, demonstrates that the kind of tension of which Beckett often writes in the diaries is essential to the poem's endeavour. Importantly, this maintenance of tension is reinforced in the poem by the strict separation of sculpture and cloistered figure. The voice of the poem desires to be temporally coincident with the moment of illumination of which it speaks, but there is no indication that the speaker can actually see or experience it in the way that such images were designed to function in the medieval Spital. Having said that, the poem clearly registers such a mode of engagement as the ultimate horizon against which its ironies and oppositions are played out.

Grünewald's Isenheim altar and Kraft's 'big black stone Christ' were each intended to provoke reflection and meditation: through such visualizations of the Passion, both the literate and illiterate were able to engage with scripture. Hans Belting argues influentially in *Likeness and Presence* that this was the primary way that images were experienced during the medieval period, and that it was only the self-consciousness of the Renaissance that brought aesthetic questions to the fore.⁸³ German Expressionism's enthusiasm for religious painting and its retrieval of medieval forms like the woodcut, sought to revive this older sensibility. Crucially, however, it understood such a practice, following Worringer, as entailing a combination of empathy and abstraction, intense identification through suffering but also a non-naturalistic stylization that conveys a 'Nordic' angst and fear of the world. In this sense, for Expressionism, the materiality and abstraction of the artwork contributes to a sense of empathic intimacy between painting and beholder. Reflecting the movement's sense of an organic, national style, allusions to traditionally stylized forms and resistant media are signs to be read by an organic community, signalling a shared ethnic *innerlichkeit*. German art history's notion of form as the expression

⁸² Nixon (2011a), p. 117.

⁸³ Belting (1996), p. 22.

of a national culture underpins this Expressionist confidence in the ability to turn formal distance into intimacy, and so interpellate the beholder. Beckett, however, although clearly drawing on similar ideas, comes to very different conclusions. Some of the frustration that he felt with such earnest Northern essentialism is apparent in the following outburst referring to Munch and Nolde:

An indigested lump of naivity . . . Not merely a whole nerve complex of the mind that has never developed . . . but this cretinosity cultivated & made participant in the statement.⁸⁴

The objection here is to the fictions of direct, visceral communication and primitivism for which the painters mentioned were celebrated. Immediately after this, Beckett implies that such a painting pays lip service to the Kantian ideas that are so important for German art history, but does not really understand them.

Like the Expressionists, Beckett's notion of art as prayer evidently gestures towards a return to a premodern aesthetic, but he cannot be accused of neglecting the insuperable obstacles placed before such a task. The Kraft poem dramatizes this formally through its unresolvable oppositions. Any sense of empathy with the image is in strict tension with the distancing notions of abstraction and materiality encountered through the play of the text's polarities. As a result, the form of subjectivity that emerges in the aesthetic relation is resolutely resistant to any form of collective sublation. Rather than being interpellated nationally, culturally or indeed in any other way by the image, in Beckett's poem the potential viewer of Kraft's sculpture is granted only a sense of the self as isolated monad that corresponds to the withdrawal and autonomy of the art object. This is the paradigmatic relationship between artwork and beholder for Beckett, and it will become a key element in his own practice. Yet we must not lose sight of the fact that, as with his readings of religious paintings in the early 1930s, here again the development of his aesthetic is also responding to a more general politics of the image between the wars.

Another example of how Beckett applies formalist readings to religious images in their devotional context is his encounter with the West choir screen of Naumberg Dom, on 26 January 1937. In his diary Beckett concentrates on the postures of the figures, the positions of their arms, and the use of depth and space, commenting how 'very architectonic' he found them, and going to evoke his conversation about the dynamics of

⁸⁴ GD., 15.1.37. Nixon (2011a), p. 214, n. 21.

groups painting with Bargheer.⁸⁵ As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Eduard Bargheer's approach to painting is clearly taken from Wölfflin's method of the analysis of internal oppositions. In Naumberg, Beckett applies a similar methodology to religious sculpture, yet the basic assumptions that underpin his reading of portraits by Giorgione, Schmitt-Rottluff and others remain the same. The 'architectonic' tensions of the figures are read directly as a sign of the psychological complexity of the image. What is more, it is the unresolved tension of the oppositions that is regarded as the important element, rather than any individual emotion expressed. This much is apparent in his description of Mary's face as an antithetical composite of rage and grief.⁸⁶ Such a sense of psychology as a matter of a formal play between opposites, rather than direct display, is very different to an Expressionist idea of the relationship between psychology and religious painting. This difference is emphasized still further as Beckett passes through the portal in the screen to the celebrated *Stiftenfiguren*, or sculptures, in the choir itself.

These twelve sculptures are of the founders of, or donors to the Dom, minor aristocracy rather than religious figures. Created in the mid-twelfth century, two hundred years after the deaths of the founders they purport to represent, they had been the subject of speculation since the late nineteenth century, with their highly individual expressions attracting scholars who recognized in them examples of typical German personalities.⁸⁷ More recently, along with the Bamberg Rider, also attributed to the anonymous Naumberg Master, the statues had been central to Nazi arguments for an art of the German Volk.⁸⁸ At the heart of both the art historical and populist agendas was the idea that the unprecedented realism of the Stifterfiguren detached them from a French mode of more stylized renderings of the human figure. What is more, the degree of their naturalism, two hundred years before Donatello, lent credence to the idea of a highly sophisticated German tradition that could rival the psychological art of the Renaissance. Beckett registers something of the latter position when

⁸⁵ GD., 26.1.37. See Nixon (2011a), p. 151. For an excellent account of the screens in Naumberg and their function see Jung (2013).

⁸⁶ G.D. 26.1.37.

⁸⁷ As Pinkus points out, German art historians such as Pinder, Dehio and Schmarsow had read these statues in a clearly ideological manner. See, for example, Pinkus (2014), pp. 37–38, for comments on the racial profiling of some of the faces as German and Slavic.

⁸⁸ For an overview of the role of the Bamberg Rider in Nazi aesthetic thought and propaganda, see William C. MacDonald, 'Concerning the Use and Abuse of a Medieval Statue in Germany from 1920–1940. The Case of the Bamberger Reiter' in *Perspicuitas*. www.uni-due.de/imperia/md/content/perspicuitas/mcdonald.pdf.

he compares the 'gulf' between the Naumberg sculptures and others at Bamberg to that between Masaccio and Giotto.⁸⁹

In the apse at Naumberg, Beckett's Wölfflinian mode of analysis is combined with a physiognomic one. He again notes complex relations of tension (although some, which he finds less architectonic than the others, he attributes to an assistant to the Master). But Beckett also returns to the faces above all.⁹⁰ The contrast that he draws between the face of the figure known as Ekkhardt, which Assaf Pinkus describes as 'somewhere between arrogance and disdain', and what Beckett calls another sculpture's 'abjection', is characteristically oppositional and psychological. According to Willibald Sauerlander's recent readings of the sculptures, these two figures represent ideal virtues of youth and maturity.⁹¹ Yet, as Pinkus points out, this reading sits ill with the celebrated naturalism of their facial expressions: if the aim was to depict abstract ideas, why the emphasis on character and psychology?⁹² Beckett's comments on similar sculptures in Bamberg indicate that he was sensitive to such considerations. Justifying his preference for Naumberg, he censures the idealism of the Bamberg figures (including the celebrated Rider), while complaining that the others attempt a degree of realism that renders them caricatures.⁹³ This suggests that the attraction of the Naumberg figures for Beckett lies in their refusal of these two poles of stable signification (i.e. both idealism and realism). Indeed it is striking that the expressions that he finds and responds to most avidly at Naumberg are almost all indicative of a withdrawn, remote, monadic quality that suspends the binary between empirical realism and an idealising abstraction. Significantly, Beckett's most succinct comment is that the sculptures are 'indescribable', and it is this quality, which he associates in the diaries, and also later, with petrification, which most moves him.

In all this, Beckett's reactions can usefully be compared to more recent interpretations. Like many earlier commentators, both Jacqueline Jung and Pinkus dwell on the way the figures work as an ensemble, creating a complex, inexhaustible web of gaze and gesture that electrifies the entire architectural space in which they stand. Who is looking at whom? What relationships are being suggested? Is there a narrative here? Indeed Pinkus, in an interesting if perhaps overstated argument, argues that the statues' expressions and poses exist to tempt the beholder to interpretation, only for the intersubjective structure of their configuration and other semiotic

⁸⁹ GD., 20.2.37.

⁹⁰ GD., 26.1.37.

⁹¹ Pinkus (2014), p. 35.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ GD., 20.2.37.

elements to throw all possible interpretation into doubt.⁹⁴ It is this combination of formal arrangement and concrete figuration which speaks to Beckett so directly. Or to put this more precisely, it is the ability of the Naumberg sculptors to press towards a remarkable degree of individuation in each image, while also placing each within a differential system of signs that continually defers meaning that attracts him. In the Naumberger Dom, Beckett thus experienced a highly structured play of formalism and psychology, autonomy and empathy, which dramatizes very accurately the central antagonism that we have been following through the diaries.

A remarkable letter to Thomas MacGreevy can put all of this in a further, historical context, however. It was written in Munich, not long before Beckett left Germany, but incorporates elements from a diary entry written earlier, and suggests that, as a result of his trip through the South, Beckett definitively pushes his preferred period of German art back in time, perhaps as a result of his experiences in Naumberg, but also, I suggest, in reaction to the contemporary tenor of German art historical discourse and its relation to politics.⁹⁵ In late December he had approvingly referred to a lineage that encompassed Pencz, Faber, Schüßle, Bruyn, Baldung, the Cranachs, Corvus, Holbein and Amberger.⁹⁶ In the letter to MacGreevy, however, he strongly dissents from this previous position:

[t]he great Nurnberg period is for me now a conspiracy. I mean the Pleydenwurf-Wohlgemut [*for* Wolgemut] - Durer and the Stoss-Kraft-Vischer turnover from say 20 years before the century end to 20 years after. It is all so terribly guildy and complacent jealous zealous artisan ... the sturdy burgher full of the sense of his worth ... and a determination to stand up to all princes and potencies sacred and profane.⁹⁷

Beckett seems to base his assessment of Nuremberg's visual culture on the plot of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, with its central theme of the antagonism between the older courtly aesthetic of the Minnesänger, personified in the figure of Walter, and the new, collective, rule-bound, bourgeois aesthetic of the Meistersingers of the title, represented by Hans Sachs. 'It is Hans Sachsism', he writes: 'not only Meistersinger, but Meistermaler & Meisterbildhauer'.⁹⁸ Where Wagner sees Sachs as the embodiment of a

⁹⁴ Pinkus (2014), pp. 29–70.

⁹⁵ Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 7 March 1937, *LSBr*, pp. 458–466. ⁹⁶ GD., 28.12.36.

⁹⁷ Letter to MacGreevy, 7 March 1937, *LSBr*, pp. 458–466, p. 460. These sentiments are repeated in a letter to Gunter Albrecht on 30 March. See *LSBr*, pp. 477–484, p. 479.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 460.

newly robust, independent and revolutionary German identity, Beckett clearly sides with the older, aristocratic dispensation. But perhaps the most interesting aspect of this uncharacteristic excursion into cultural history is the comment: 'it was a democracy without historical context'.⁹⁹ Here Beckett makes clear that he sees fifteenth-century Nuremberg's exceptional political autonomy, and the consequent power of its bourgeoisie, as the root cause of the aesthetic decline from a previous courtly and religious art.

One important effect of this is the light it throws on Beckett's attitudes towards the consolidation of a psychologically convincing realism in German art. The 'sturdy burgher' and the 'guildy and complacent . . . zealous artisan' collaborate in the production of this new art. These are two different groups and should not be conflated, yet Beckett stresses their intimacy and shared form of subjectivity. Such an identification suggests his revulsion from the whole structure of the transformed relations between art, selfhood and public sphere attendant on the Reformation. Indeed Beckett makes an incendiary connection in this respect: 'they drove out the Jews in 1499 and kept them out for 3 and a half centuries.'¹⁰⁰ The implication of a continuity between the bourgeois humanist past and the Nazi present could not be clearer. The Renaissance burgher and the artisan are seen as complicit in their violent maintenance of cultural hegemony. Indeed their newly powerful yet fragile form of identity – 'over excited and over-irritable' as Beckett describes it – is dependent on such complicity and violence.¹⁰¹ The humanist images of the sixteenth century are read as part of this process of reinforcing and perpetuating a new group identity. In this sense, the naturalistic art of the Nuremberg artists is grasped as social and political above all, interpellating individuals through the assertion of collective norms. There can be no doubt that this reading of Dürer and the art of Nuremberg, the city where the infamous anti-Semitic laws had been promulgated three years earlier, must be profoundly influenced by the Fascist cult of beauty and Nordic *Schoenheit* with which Beckett was surrounded during his time there.

For Beckett, the so-called German Renaissance is thus a decline from something much more interesting, strange and 'indescribable', and it is the association of an increased naturalism with the rise of individualism that seems to be at the root of this falling away. Yet although social and political factors have a part to play in his criticisms of the Nuremberg painters and

⁹⁹ Ibid.¹⁰⁰ Ibid.¹⁰¹ Ibid.

sculptors, Beckett does not see the art of an earlier period, such as that of the Naumberg Master, as a metonym for a whole alternative social order, in the way that his addressee Thomas MacGreevy does, for example. There is no nostalgia for an organic *Gemeinschaft* here.¹⁰² Rather it is a specific form of the individual relation to the artwork that Beckett searches for as antidote, one that holds identity and difference, realism and abstraction, in a complex, ironic tension. As we have seen, Beckett looks consistently for antithesis and undecidability in his art. His own notion of a 'psychological' depiction is thus not the conventional art-historical one, but is rather an image that is caught up in a formal structure of oppositions and contrasts that render it ultimately unreadable. Medieval religious representations, specifically those designed to act as aid to prayer and personal meditation, as they are experienced by a modern secular beholder, offer him a model for such a relationship with the figurative image. Adorno draws on similar resources in *Aesthetic Theory*, when he writes that art 'is the only figure, at the contemporary stage of rationality, in which something like the divine language of creation is reflected, qualified by the paradox that what is reflected is blocked'.¹⁰³ As we have seen, this blockage is dramatized for Beckett by the gulf between Dives and Lazarus, painting and beholder. The poem based on Adam Kraft's crucifixion, with its separation and identification of artwork and suffering inmate, and its many other irresolvable oppositions is instructive here. Similarly, in Beckett's readings of Giorgione, Schmidt-Rottluff, the Naumberg *Stifterfiguren* and elsewhere, presentations of human experience are caught up in formal networks of opposition, tension and unresolvability. These militate against any version of realism that equates mimetic accuracy with stable meaning and specular identification between beholder and figure beheld. But they still remain realistic. When Beckett admires the sense of interiority that charges a painting or sculpture, it is the way that a definitive psychological reading is both suggested and frustrated that appeals to him, and ultimately it is the withdrawal or undecidability of the central figure that is his focus. In this

¹⁰² 'there is . . . much to be said for the theory that the greater cathedrals of the Middle Ages mark the highest point ever attained in architecture and its dependent arts. It is . . . hard to believe that the Parthenon can have stirred even the most devout worshipper of Pallas Athena as deeply as Notre Dame de Chartres still, seven hundred years after it was built, stirs us. How indeed should it? For . . . the Christianity of the Middle Ages, the Christianity that preceded both Reformation and Counter Reformation, postulated a set of spiritual values at once so awe-inspiring and so tender as to transcend any set of spiritual values known to antiquity.' MacGreevy (1938), pp. 167–170, p. 167.

¹⁰³ Adorno (2002), p. 78.

respect, his marvellous description of a Dirck Bouts' crucifixion draws together once again the themes of religion, art, antithesis, psychology and undecidability that are such a feature of the diaries: 'interesting type for Christ, approaching Boschian, half-idiot, half cunning. The remoteness almost of schizophrenia.'¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ GD., 8.3.37. Nixon (2011a), p. 145.

CHAPTER 4

'Terrifying Materiality' *Watteau, Yeats, Picasso, Duchamp*

In Vermeer's *The Procuress*, which Beckett saw in the Zwinger Museum in Dresden, a soldier simultaneously paws and pays a prostitute while the madame looks on eagerly. Beckett first refers to it on 16 February 1937, when he complains that it is 'literally invisible' due to the 'scandal' of its hanging.¹ He then returns the next day to find it moved to another room:

See it, in the good light, really for first time, the man on left clearly and the lurid evening sky . . . that does not function in the Rembrandt room, & that flattens & defines the key of the whole picture, gives it substance and immediacy, an immediacy of the everlasting transitory, situates it in eternity.²

Beckett's description conforms to two closely related aspects of modernist aesthetics. On the one hand there is the rhetorical flourish of the painting being an 'everlasting transitory, situate[d] in eternity'. The paradox of the 'everlasting transitory' is a familiar trope – *Augenblick*, *kairos*, the eternity that is also a fragment of time – most famously expressed by Baudelaire in 'The Painter of Modern Life': 'By "modernity" I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable'.³

On the other hand, there are the formalist elements at work in Beckett's account. It is the non-naturalistic 'lurid' sky, its 'function' of artificially flattening the picture, that eventually reveals the painting's quality. To put this another way, the self-conscious display of the art surface creates, in two key materialist terms, the 'substance' and 'immediacy' that Beckett appreciates. These two words are members of the larger family of terms that Beckett reserves for the paintings that particularly strike him. Like the word 'concrete', they evoke an intense sensory presence that bypasses the

¹ Letter to Günter Albrecht, 30 March 1937, *LSBI*, pp. 477–484, p. 478.

² GD., 17.2.1937. See *LSBI*, p. 482, n. 5. ³ Baudelaire (1996), p. 13.



Figure 4.1 Johannes Vermeer, *The Procuress*, Dresden, bpk/Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden/Herbert Boswank

intellect. The key agent here is the 'lurid' orange-yellow glow that Beckett sees behind the madame's head. Heightened by the red and yellow of the pair of figures on the right, this small, complex patch of advancing colour brings the interval between the heads of the second man and the madame closer to the picture plane, countering the sense of depth that the strongly overlapping and receding forms of the figures of girl, soldier, procuress and the carpet in the foreground emphasize. This is what Beckett means by a 'flattening' of the picture, an insistence on its status as two-dimensional representation rather than transparent window. As so often in Beckett's responses to painting, there are affinities here with the kind of analysis practised by Fry or Wölfflin, in his attention to colour, balance, recession and surface. And the passage strongly suggests that it is the structure detected, the painting's significant form that, when read properly, renders the image autonomous, situating it outside time.

The fact that Beckett, in his reference to the 'key' of the picture, draws on an analogy with music to describe the Vermeer's formal qualities is significant, echoing as it does his comments on another image seen in the Zwinger just two days before. But the reading of this picture is much more original, interesting and influential in the long run. The painting is Caspar David Friedrich's 'Two Men Observing the Moon', of which Beckett remarks on his 'pleasant predilection for two tiny languid men in his landscapes, as in the little moon landscape, that is the only kind of

romantic still tolerable, the *bémolisé*'.⁴ 'Two Men' is a dorsal picture. As with Friedrich's many other paintings using the motif of the *Rückenfigur*, the figures have turned their backs on us so that while we share their contemplative stance, we are simultaneously cut off from their expressions. This duality is repeated in the deployment of perspective: although the picture encourages the beholder's orientation towards the distant moon, there is very little sense of depth to the image. Despite the frame-within-frame device of tree trunk and branch, the moon itself seems to lack a ground, appearing to float in a void. In this sense the picture, like Vermeer's *Procuress*, is 'flattened'.

Beckett's description of 'Two Men' as a romantic '*bémolisé*' helps to clarify what he means by 'flattening' in his description of the Vermeer. He is remembering the moment in Proust when Swann hears the 'little line' of a violin, and associates it with 'the mauve tumult of waves charmed and softened by the moonlight' ('la mauve agitation des flots que charme et *bémolisé* le clair de lune').⁵ '*Bémolisé*', then, is a musical term meaning to flatten or soften: the reference is presumably to the restrained and uniform palette of browns and ochres that Friedrich uses, which adds to the lack of depth and general consistency of the picture. At the same time, however, as mentioned above, a glance at the Friedrich confirms that while flattened tonally, the picture also has a markedly depthless quality due to its structure, with the large expanse of the sky providing no real perspectival apparatus for the eye to orientate itself to. The flat quality of which Beckett approves refers to the painting's foregrounding of its material surface, as well as to its emotional reticence. For both the Vermeer and the Friedrich then, the emphasis on the art surface is inseparable from a certain sense of withdrawal. In the Vermeer this takes the form, as we have seen, of a removal from time, an insertion into eternity that can be associated with a modernist *topos* of autonomy. The Friedrich, however, in its dorsality, announces something else, a combination of materiality and the enigmatic suspension of affect that will one day be called Beckettian.⁶

Beckett's position at this point can be drawn out further by considering his responses to a particular set of paintings encountered during his time in Germany in 1936–1937. In each of these cases he focuses on an individual with his or her back turned. Thus a young shepherd's back in Signorelli's

⁴ GD., 14.2.37. ⁵ Proust (2013), p. 239.

⁶ Beckett reported that *Godot* was partially inspired by this painting. He also recalled it while writing *Watt*. See Knowlson (1996), p. 254.

Pan elicits a comparison with a similar figure in El Greco.⁷ Encountering Terborch's *Väterliche Ermahnung* in Berlin, after disputing the conventional reading of the painting, Beckett focuses in on the woman's oblique relation to the picture plane.⁸ And when commenting on Jan Steen's *The Baptism* Beckett makes special reference to another woman, and here too the figure is substantially turned away from the viewer.

Similarly, Beckett's deeply felt response to Emil Nolde's *Christ and the Children* emphasizes the way that the back of the central figure structures the composition as a whole:

clot of yellow infants, long green back of Christ (David?) leading to back & beards of Apostles. Lovely eyes of child held in His arms. Feel at once on terms with the picture, & that I want to spend a long time in front of it.⁹

Or we could refer to a picture like Hans Moloenar's *The Smoker*, which Beckett saw in Berlin, empathizing with the central figure with his back to the world.¹⁰ Or a Renoir in Dresden, where he argues that nothing is important save the red hair flowing down a woman's naked back.¹¹ This obsessive return to the back is another example of Beckett's consistent interest in a painting that resists both world and beholder through the use of forms of figuration that cannot be reduced to a simple mimesis. When he returns from Germany in mid-1937, Beckett continues to think through such ideas of a realism that is somehow rendered unreal, suspended, abstracted, petrified. The central painter here will be Jack B. Yeats.

In May 1936 Thomas MacGreevy had proposed a monograph on Yeats.¹² Both Beckett and MacGreevy knew the artist well, and greatly admired his work, albeit for different reasons. The book was finished by January 1938, but the war intervened and it was not published until 1945. In what follows I will draw on the text itself, Beckett's review of it and letters from the period to reconstruct the debate around Yeats that was undoubtedly taking place between the two men in the late 1930s. As ever, Beckett turns this discussion to his own concerns with the subject-object relation, the materiality of the artwork, the nature of the (in)human and questions of temporality. In the course of this he strikes a series of attitudes that anticipate the notions of theatricality, anti-theatricality and absorption that Michael Fried employs in his work on eighteenth-century French painting.¹³ Indeed Beckett insists on such qualities, or something close to

⁷ GD., 16.12.36.

⁸ GD., 5.1.37. My italics.

⁹ GD., 19.11.36.

¹⁰ GD., 5.1.37.

¹¹ GD., 14.2.37.

¹² Letter to MacGreevy, 23 July 1936, *LSBr*, pp. 337–339, p. 337.

¹³ Fried (1980).

them, as essential to Yeats, and there are indications that MacGreevy eventually incorporates some of these ideas into his book, while also to some extent resisting them.

Take the following example, where Beckett mentions Chardin (a painter essential to Fried's account) in the context of MacGreevy's concern to place Jack B. Yeats' paintings in a tradition of representing 'ordinary people', commenting on the manuscript: 'on p. 7 the name of Douanier Rousseau suggested itself to me to follow le Nain, Chardin, Millet and Courbet'.¹⁴ Beckett refers here to the moment in the book where MacGreevy argues that there is a sustained attention to everyday life in a particular strain of French art, though we should also note the reference to Dutch painting at the end:

The Gothic sculptors and stained glass painters depicted it [i.e. everyday life] in thirteenth century France. The fourteenth century French illuminator Pol de Limbourg was probably the first artist who carried it into painting, and through the le Nains, Chardin, Millet and Courbet it has held its own in French art right down to our own day. All the artists of seventeenth century Spain depicted it in both their religious and profane pictures. A comparatively large number of painters depicted it in seventeenth century Holland.¹⁵

MacGreevy's book clearly sees Yeats as the scion of a predominantly realist, secular tradition that is devoted to the quotidian. Similarly, for Fried, Chardin's routine moments in the lives of anonymous individuals opens the way for the great achievements of nineteenth-century realists like Millet and Courbet. For Fried, however, it is not Chardin's concentration on ordinary people that is important, but more particularly his refusal to have the people portrayed engage or acknowledge the viewer. It is this formal move that is revolutionary, rather than the levelling, democratic spirit that MacGreevy finds in the French tradition and, through his analysis of the same 'spirit' in Yeats' work, associates with a cultural nationalism rife in both Ireland and France in the 1930s. Significantly, Beckett dissents from MacGreevy's politicization of Yeats, and accentuates, like Fried, a formal reading, drawing attention to the postures of the figures in the work, postures that recall those that Fried will label

¹⁴ Letter to MacGreevy, 31 January 1938, *LSBr*, pp. 598–602, p. 598. Beckett's addition of Rousseau to this list might seem eccentric, but in doing so he reflects the central role this painter played in French debates in the 1930s and again in the mid-1940s concerning the relationship between popular art, politics and the avant-garde.

¹⁵ MacGreevy (1945), p. 9

‘absorptive’. As Beckett puts it in his review of MacGreevy’s book, published in *The Irish Times* in 1945,

[t]he being in the street, when it happens in the room, the being in the room when it happens in the street, the turning to gaze from land to sea, from sea to land, the backs to one another and the eyes abandoning, the man alone trudging in the sand, the man alone thinking (thinking!) in his box – these are characteristic notations.¹⁶

The first phrase here captures succinctly Beckett’s sense of Yeats’ pictures moving between the public and the private, between isolation and exposure to the community. The implication is that while the paintings do depict collectivity in the way MacGreevy wants them to, they are concerned too with experiences that are profoundly private, and that the two aspects are deeply intertwined. The motifs of turning away, eyes abandoning and the man alone thinking in his box are ‘characteristic notations’, not only of Yeats’ painting but also of the tradition that Fried constructs. As we have seen, this aesthetic of reservation, withdrawal and turning away also governs Beckett’s responses to certain paintings in the German diaries where he registers a predilection for paintings of dorsality and writes approvingly of the ‘reticence’ and the ‘unsaid’ of Giorgione’s *Self-Portrait* or the ‘stillness and the unsaid’ of Wilhelm Grimm and Karl Ballmer.¹⁷ This mounting emphasis on arrest is another indication of Beckett’s development away from modernist vitalism, although paradoxically it brings him closer to another modernist concern, that of the autonomy and formal self-referentiality of the art object that we saw in his comments on Vermeer earlier.

MacGreevy’s book refers to Yeats in a similar fashion to Beckett’s review, suggesting that the latter’s concern with posture and gesture was something that cropped up in exchanges between the two men. Yet once again, as the reference to ‘inner discipline’ in the quotation below demonstrates, MacGreevy is always concerned to politicize his responses, here interpreting the withdrawn nature of the faces in the paintings as evidence of Irish dignity and control in the face of a long history of stereotypes of anarchy, sentimentality and self-indulgence:

Jack Yeats’ people are frequently depicted in the pursuit of pleasure at the circus or music hall at race meetings, or simply in conversation with each other. Yet often the expression on their faces suggests restraint, thoughtfulness, an inner discipline.¹⁸

¹⁶ Beckett (1983), p. 97.

¹⁷ Nixon (2011a), pp. 143–144, p. 160.

¹⁸ MacGreevy (1945).

Beckett's description, by contrast, pointedly refrains from such interpretation. As with his reaction to the Naumberg statues, silence, reticence and impassivity are valued for their own sake rather than as vectors pointing to fixed meanings or singular emotions. Or perhaps more accurately, Beckett identifies a certain blankness, an indescribability, to such postures, a resistance to interpretation that he will eventually exploit to great effect in his own work. Certainly it is difficult to parse the heads of the figures in Yeats' painting of the 1930s in MacGreevy's terms of facial 'expression'. Beckett relies on a rather different set of terms for such stubborn knots of facture: the inorganic, the inhuman, the petrified.

It is with this that we can introduce another painter who figures in the debates with MacGreevy in the late 1930s, Antoine Watteau. Watteau was a very important figure for the tradition of symbolist poetry that was so central to the evolution of the modernist image. Pater, the Goncourts, Baudelaire, Verlaine, de Banville and Gautier all referred to Watteau's paintings as exemplary.¹⁹ As Catherine Cusset points out, this tradition argued that Watteau's paintings exhibited a pervasive melancholy predicated on resistance to interpretation.²⁰ Norman Bryson has used the term 'semantic vacuum' to describe this aspect of Watteau's painting, the way its figures and details, while suggesting narrative meaning, also frustrate it. As he puts it: 'Watteau's strategy is to release enough discourse for the viewer to begin to verbalise the image, but not enough in quality or specificity for the image to be exhausted'.²¹ Bryson sees this as the core of Watteau's modernity, and of his appeal to later artists and writers, calling the experience produced one of 'reverie'. Beckett too is profoundly moved and intrigued by the problems Watteau's work poses for interpretation and the remote, withdrawn nature of the figures in his paintings.

In his book on Yeats, MacGreevy mentions that 'a few months ago Samuel Beckett wrote to me that he had been looking at some recent works by Jack Yeats. "He grows Watteauer and Watteauer" he commented. I was startled by the comparison for, superficially, nothing could be more different than the work of the two artists'.²² Contrary to what MacGreevy says, however, there are some obvious connections between the two painters, such as their fondness for outdoor social scenes, and their vivid use of colour for costume. Yet Beckett's concerns are more recondite than this, as is clear from two enormously important letters to MacGreevy and Cissie Sinclair, both written on 14 August 1937, and

¹⁹ See Rajan (1997), pp. 185–206. ²⁰ Cusset (1999), pp. 178–179, n. 23.

²¹ Bryson (1983), p. 74. ²² MacGreevy (1945), p. 15.

sharing significant content. Here he places Yeats in continuity with the tradition of a literary Watteau mentioned briefly above, and in doing so emphasizes the opaque aspects of each painter's figures, seeing in both a depiction of human life in an inorganic or inhuman manner. Hence he suggests to Sinclair that 'Watteau put in busts and urns, I suppose to suggest the inorganism of the organic – all his people are mineral in the end'.²³ Such references to the inorganic and the mineral take up ideas and moods present in the earlier letters on landscape and in the German diaries' concern with sculpture. Although Beckett goes on to distinguish Watteau from Yeats, he will end, in the MacGreevy letter, by speaking of the 'petrification' of a figure in *The Storm*, a term which seems contiguous with the 'mineralization' he discerns in Watteau. And once again the motif of the turned back appears, here in the context of what is for Fried a classically absorptive activity, that of reading:

And do you remember the picture of a man sitting under a fuschia hedge, reading, with his back turned to the sea and the thunder clouds? One does not realise how still his pictures are till one looks at others, almost petrified, a sudden suspension of the performance, of the convention of sympathy and antipathy, meeting and parting, joy and sorrow.²⁴

Whereas there is no discussion at all of landscape in the Sinclair letter, the one to MacGreevy begins by considering Yeats' work through comments that also recall the Cezanne letter of 1935, with its rejection of anthropomorphic forms of landscape painting. The emphasis is on an absolute break between the human and nature:

What I feel he gets so well, dispassionately, not tragically like Watteau, is the heterogeneity of nature and the human denizens, the unalterable alienness of the 2 phenomena, the 2 solitudes or the solitude & the loneliness, the loneliness in solitude, the impassible immensity between the solitude that cannot quicken into loneliness & the loneliness that cannot lapse into solitude.²⁵

The similar 'impassible immensity' between Dives and Lazarus examined in [Chapter 3](#) is here translated into one between the human subject and the inhuman landscape. But note that Beckett suggests a parallelism as well as a breach. Even though the two elements of nature and the human are described as 'heterogeneous' and 'alien', they are nevertheless both seen as 'phenomena', and as 'solitudes'. And although 'solitude' is subsequently

²³ Letter to Cissie Sinclair, 14 August 1937, *LSBI*, pp. 534–538, pp. 535–536.

²⁴ Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 14 August 1937, *LSBI*, pp. 539–543, p. 540.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

modulated slightly to 'loneliness' in the case of the human, there remains a strong sense of an equation between the two conditions. In the MacGreevy letter it is this equation that prepares the way for the next move, where 'everything' is seen as 'inorganic':

And perhaps that is the final quale of Jack Yeats's painting, a sense of *the ultimate inorganism of everything*. Watteau stressed it with busts and urns, his people are mineral in the end. A painting of pure inorganic juxtapositions, where nothing can be taken or given & there is no possibility of change or exchange. I find something terrifying for example in the way Yeats puts down a man's head and a woman's head side by side, or face by face, the awful experience of 2 entities that will never mingle.²⁶

Watteau does indeed often include urns, busts and, though Beckett does not explicitly say so, classical sculptures in his paintings of groups in parks and glades. Beckett had seen many examples of such works in Germany, and regretted not being able to spend more time with them.²⁷ Commenting ironically on *The Feast of Love* in Dresden, he argues that it is a depiction of sexual exhaustion, with the stone Venus and cupid epitomizing this. In *The Pleasures of Love*, meanwhile, a painting that depicts a party of young men and women talking and flirting, Beckett concentrates on the man standing alone and staring at a stone nymph, adding sardonically that he is as well employed as the courting couples in the picture.²⁸ Earlier, after a performance of *The Marriage of Figaro*, Beckett had also mentioned Watteau's enervated social landscapes, arguing that although the production attempted to rival Watteau's cold abstract gaze on sex, it was by comparison as earthy as a painting by Bruegel the elder.²⁹

In these descriptions sexuality stands in for the philosophical vitalism that Beckett is by now highly suspicious of. By draining passion from the world, Watteau also subtracts the kind of sensuous aesthetic experience valorized by, for example, Franz Marc. In his reading of Watteau, Beckett is ironizing the Bergsonian and broadly modernist wish for a continuity between art, self and world, the assertion of an authentic, sensuous immersive image. Refracted through Beckett's entropic vision, and Watteau's chilly ensembles, this becomes instead a continuity of the inorganic: a shared, base, desublimated materialism. As with Picasso's 'painting of the inanimate', man becomes an object amongst objects. Yet what is so telling, and so wholly characteristic, is the way in which, writing to MacGreevy, Beckett immediately translates this notion of a continuity, however

²⁶ Ibid. My italics.

²⁷ See GD., 12.1.37.

²⁸ GD., 9.2.37.

²⁹ GD., 2.2.37.

ironized, back into an opposition. Everything is inorganic, yes, but this is demonstrated by the opposition, the *juxtaposition*, as he puts it, between individual humans, or between things in general, in a situation where there is 'no possibility of change or exchange'. That is to say, there remains here an ontology based on the inviolable singleness of all entities: what humans and things have in common is their monadic isolation. Once again this contrasts with the vitalist ontology of flow that Beckett, in his readings of Watteau, associates with sexual desire.

In the letter to Cissie Sinclair, the way Yeats' painting dramatizes this ontology in terms of the relationships between individuals is usefully expanded. Significantly, the core practice is what Beckett calls a 'suspension' of the emotional and the social: 'as though the convention were suddenly suspended, the convention and performance of love and hate, joy and pain, giving and being given, taking and being taken. A kind of petrified insight into one's own ultimate hard inorganic singleness'.³⁰ The final clause here is one of the most important in all of Beckett's writing about art, revealing as it does his sense of a contract between painting and beholder, where the hermetic, autonomous qualities of the former allow insight into the monadic predicament of the latter.

At this juncture it is useful to note that the busts and urns Beckett seizes on in Watteau's paintings are artefacts; are indeed artworks. In other words the exemplary juxtaposition, the one that reveals most vividly the shared inorganicism of human and world, is that between the artwork and its beholder. Although Beckett does not state it directly, the relationship between the individuals in Watteau's paintings, and the ornamental urns and sculptures they walk among, parallels that between the viewer of Watteau's painting and the painting itself. Just as Watteau's figures are addressed by, and implicated in, the materiality of the urns, so the viewer too must be sensitive to the autonomous, artificial, material nature of the painting, and this holds true also for Yeats.

One authority for such a reading is the moment when, slightly earlier in the letter to MacGreevy, Beckett contrasts a romantic conception of landscape with the landscape seen as a 'stage set':

in Constable, the landscape shelters or threatens or serves or destroys, his nature is really infected with 'spirit' ultimately as humanised & romantic as Turner's was & Claude's was not & Cezanne's was not. God knows it doesn't take much sensitiveness to feel that in Ireland, a nature almost as inhumanly inorganic as a stage set.³¹

³⁰ *LSBI*, p. 536. ³¹ *LSBI*, p. 540.

The comparison in the final sentence initially seems counter-intuitive. Throughout the letter, Beckett emphasizes the absolutely alien nature of the landscapes he prizes, their articulation of a radical difference from man. Now, however, he associates landscape with a theatre set, the epitome of the man-made: an artificial, human object. One can understand that the set is inorganic, in the sense that it is a representation, and has therefore an air of the unreal. It is an image, a fabrication (in Beckett's time), of wood or canvas and paint. But it is important to note the departure here from Beckett's 1934 evocation of the landscape as 'by definition unapproachably alien, unintelligible arrangement of atoms'.³² The principal connotations of the new simile are of artificiality, rather than brute materiality, for the defining feature of the stage set is after all its flattened, abstract quality. It is like a painting. The simile suggests, in other words, Beckett's growing apprehension that the art object itself can be an exemplary instantiation of the inhuman. Rather than seeing the landscape as aestheticized here, it is more illuminating to grasp how the argument also assumes the highly wrought aspect of the aesthetic object. 'A garden is more frightening than a waste', Beckett had written to MacGreevy in 1932, when comparing the Galway mountains and Wicklow ('the garden of Ireland' as it is still known).³³ This flash of insight into the aesthetic power of restraint and artificiality, rather than natural grandeur, only now in 1937 assumes its real importance, as part of what Beckett refers to in the German diaries as a romanticism *bémolisé*.

And this is what he finds in Watteau in 1937. The very term *fête galante*, Watteau's signature subject, suggests a landscape subdued to human artifice and sociality, and it is a common device in his work for the complex social relations between figures to be replicated in highly geometrical landscapes.³⁴ Watteau's busts and urns are in effect ornaments, and his careful placing of them, together with the ordered, domesticated quality of the natural environments in which we find them, emphasizes classical restraint. If for Beckett nature must be denaturalized in order to be exposed as the alien, inorganic object that it is, then Watteau's seemingly superficial depiction of fashionable intrigue is the perfect foil to Turner and Constable, as well as to Irish painters like Seán Keating.

In August 1937 Beckett had suggested an affinity between Yeats and Constable to MacGreevy, but soon after qualified this by saying that he had been referring solely to the handling of paint in certain passages.³⁵

³² *LSBI*, p. 223. ³³ *LSBI*, p. 136. ³⁴ See Cohen (2006), pp. 99–103.

³⁵ Letter to MacGreevy, 4 August 1937, *LSBI*, pp. 529–533, p. 530.

In his book MacGreevy carefully distinguishes between Yeats and Constable too, insisting that while the Irish painter had probably learned from his English predecessor, the latter's figures are 'conventions, animated objects appropriate to the landscape, like birds and beasts, nothing more'.³⁶ He makes a similar point slightly later when he writes: 'for Salvatore Rosa, for Poussin when he concentrated his attention seriously on landscape, for Claude at all times, for Ruisdael and for Constable, the figures are mere conventions'.³⁷ The last three painters mentioned are all cited by Beckett in the 1937 letter on Watteau. The fact that they are also included in MacGreevy's book is another indication of the extent to which it is informed by the debate we are reconstructing here. But by the same token, Beckett's monadic aesthetic, as it is articulated in late 1937, must be seen to some degree as a reaction to MacGreevy's positions. Specifically, again relying on the Yeats book as eventually published, it is MacGreevy's notion of a spirit of the people, his equation of landscape with identity, and a broader, often-evoked but ill-defined idea of humanism that are the intellectual assumptions against which the Yeats/Watteau letters to MacGreevy and Sinclair are reacting. If we consider MacGreevy's definition of the human in his book on Yeats, for example, we get a glimpse of what is at stake in the two men's debate on painting. For MacGreevy: 'human means more than endeavour, means, for instance, appreciation of the wonders of creation – which are so very near to one in the West of Ireland which . . . turn one's perceptions into something very like prayer'.³⁸ This statement operates within parameters close to those that define Beckett's field of concerns in the period – prayer, perception, the human – but note how MacGreevy takes the modernist issue of sense perception and converts it into praise of creation and nationalist exaltation. This suggests the coordinates of the larger conversation within which Beckett's exploration of his own set of preoccupations must be set.

Bearing all of this in mind we can return to the moment in the 1937 letters when Beckett explicitly stages an aesthetic judgement, describing, as he did with his response to Vermeer's *The Procuress*, the 'sudden' moment where the subject experiences the object as art. This time, however, the familiar modernist combination of formalism and transport is transmuted by Beckett's own preoccupations. I have already quoted the relevant section from the MacGreevy letter; the Sinclair version is slightly different:

³⁶ MacGreevy (1945), pp. 12–13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ MacGreevy (1945), p. 24.

[t]he way he puts down a man's head and a woman's head, side by side, or face by face, is terrifying, two irreducible singlenesses and the impassible immensity between. I suppose that is what gives the stillness to his pictures, as though the convention were suddenly suspended, the convention and performance of love & hate, joy & pain, giving & being given, taken & being taken. A kind of petrified insight into one's own hard, irreducible singleness.³⁹

Note that Beckett does not examine a specific picture, but essays a more general description of technique: 'the way he puts down a man's head and a woman's head, side by side'. Such a description suggests a signature procedure on Yeats' part, and that seems to be Beckett's intention – to assert a style or tactic that will form the material basis for his reading of the whole *oeuvre*. There is no possibility of relationship between the individuals in this generic Yeats painting; they are '2 entities that will never mingle'. And yet there is a very strong relationship between the viewer and the painting, one that Beckett sees created by Yeats' distinctive formal tactic of juxtaposition. Thus Yeats depicts the 'impassible immensity' between his characters, but in doing so supplies what Beckett calls a 'petrified insight into one's own hard, irreducible singleness'. 'Petrified insight': this phrase is from the Sinclair letter; in the equivalent letter to MacGreevy, the word 'petrified' is applied not to the beholder's insight, but only to describe the 'stillness' of the painting itself. Petrification occurs on both sides of the divide between painting and beholder then, and in each case seems to mean a certain kind of stillness. This stillness of the painting comes about because of the 'impassible immensity' between the two characters depicted, for such a breach reveals the impossibility of social exchange, of 'the performance of love & hate, joy and pain' between them. Yet this materialized impasse also stills the beholder, shocking them with this assertion of radical isolation. The notion of petrification has connotations of mineralization and the inorganic, of course, and there is thus a strong sense here of the painting actually freezing the viewer, rendering them dead. But most importantly, Beckett is also thinking here of Leibniz: the 'hard, irreducible singleness' experienced is that of the monad.

These are very radical claims to make for painting, a token of the profound respect that Beckett had for Yeats. They are part of a concerted effort to think about art in terms that do not retreat back into either a modernist rhetoric of vitalist immediacy, or a standard neo-Kantian dualistic model. And yet, as with earlier moments in Beckett's aesthetic

³⁹ *LSBI*, p. 536.

thought, there are traces of both these positions. His accounts of both Yeats and Watteau actively depend on the establishment of a formal distance between the beholder as subject and the painting as object. There is no fusion, no 'pure optical experience' ruffling the molecules of the retina or brain. What we have instead is what Beckett calls Yeats' 'dispassionate perception', a disenchanted recognition of the impossibility of relation. And yet even so there is a clear emphasis on a kind of substantial immediacy between object and beholder, a common ground in the mutual petrification that takes place. It is as if the vitalist view of the world as a dance that elides the subject-object distinction is reworked as a calcification or congealing that is the real condition of all being. This is the stillness that Beckett speaks of.

Such ambiguity is particularly apparent in the Yeats pictures to which Beckett is most attracted. The paintings that he owned himself, and those that he refers to in letters to MacGreevy, all come from the period after 1924 when, in MacGreevy's terms 'the handling ... began to be more summary [and] the palette knife was frequently substituted for the brush'.⁴⁰ The latter substitution, in particular, roughens the facture and creates a highly wrought surface that advertises its status as an object. The attraction of Yeats' painting is that his late style, with its lathered and rutted canvases, foregrounds the human labour of its creation but, like Picasso's *Figure au Bord de la Mer*, also creates an alien, mineral landscape that corresponds to Beckett's notion of a monadic ontology in which the beholder recognizes his own opacity.

It is here that we can begin to see in more detail the justice of Beckett's link between Yeats and Watteau. A good example of the connection is *The Gathering in a Park*, held in the Louvre and thus very familiar to both Beckett and MacGreevy. The scene takes place at twilight and, between large masses of darkened foliage on the right and the left, an opening gives a glimpse of the evening sky, sending a vertical bar up and down the canvas. This column of light leads the eye to a standing couple, both with their backs to the viewer. Ranged alongside, but separate from the couple, seated rather than standing, are a group of others, ten in all, five of whom are turned away. This is a highly dorsal painting, then, and to some degree an absorptive one in Fried's sense. The viewer is drawn in by the perspective, but rebuffed by the turned backs, interpretation is provoked by the various gambits and intrigues going on amongst the group of ten men and women, but ultimately stymied by a sense of exclusion. One of the ways

⁴⁰ MacGreevy (1945), p. 28.



Figure 4.2 Antoine Watteau, *The Gathering in a Park*, photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre)/Stéphane Maréchal

in which Watteau generates such anti-theatrical effects is through the weighty sculptural quality his brush lends to eighteenth-century dress. This is particularly apparent in *The Gathering in a Park* where, right across the bottom of the picture, masses of highlights gleam from elaborately arranged folds and crinkles of satin. The figures seem, as a result, intensely artificial but also concrete, especially when compared with the subtle feathery foliage of the trees above where they meet the light.

It is in the abstract facture of these dresses and their pinks, yellows and silvers that one can find an anticipation of late Yeats' stiff, sculptural figures. But it was not only the rich apparel of the aristocracy that Watteau relished: the costumes of Gilles, Pierrot, Harlequin, Columbine and other characters from the *Commedia dell'Arte* also caught his eye. Pierrot, for example, with his pallor and affectless demeanour, is another incarnation of Watteau's interest in images of withdrawal. As MacGreevy points out, Yeats painted such characters too: harlequins, circus performers and street entertainers.⁴¹ Take the painting that first prompted Beckett to link him with Watteau.⁴² *In Memory of Boucicault and Bianconi* depicts a travelling

⁴¹ MacGreevy (1945), p. 15.

⁴² See *LSBI*, p. 538, n. 4.



Figure 4.3 Jack B. Yeats, *In Memory of Bouicault and Bianconi*, 1937, National Gallery of Ireland Collection. Photo © National Gallery of Ireland

theatre troupe with one of the Italian longcars or horse-drawn coaches that were a feature of the painter's childhood in Sligo.

The actors appear to be performing a scene from Bouicault's *The Shaughraun*. Quite apart from the connection with Watteau through such subject matter, one can see stylistic parallels. Yeats builds up his bodies in a similar manner to Watteau, boldly modelling them through many thick, rapid, vivid strokes that raise them off the canvas and give them a dense, material weight.

Beckett's point about the way Yeats puts down a man's head and a woman's head side by side, or face to face, is illustrated right at the centre of this painting. The strong, heavily highlighted downrush of the waterfall draws the eye to the two characters, a man and a woman, standing at its foot. The woman's pale face stands out against the stony grey of the water; she is looking up and to her left. Her face is relatively delicate in its delineation; one can see eyes, mouth, nose and even the direction of her glance. The man on her right, his face placed just at the edge of the water, appears to be reaching out to her, yet it is almost impossible to say with any certainty. Compared to the woman, his face is a hard, unforgiving impasto. The hints of a moustache, hat and red coat suggest that he is a

soldier, Boucicault's Captain Molineaux. But there is no real way to discern his features in any more detail. It is the thickness of the facture that one notices more than anything else.

The final stretch of the waterfall intervenes between these two figures to emphasize their separation. Here Yeats' thick mass of brushstrokes, much more uniform in colour and direction than anywhere else on the canvas, is interrupted by a strange double smear from the palette knife. These two blocks of dark blue, only touching by two or three loops of paint at the top, seem an echo of the two heads on either side, emphasizing their importance but also reinforcing their density and materiality. Otherwise the central, solid sweep of white acts in a structurally similar way to Watteau's vertical band of sky in *The Gathering in a Park*, serving to emphasize the density and flatness of the rest of the picture. Indeed Yeats' composition propounds this density in a much more radical way than anything in Watteau. The looming wall of rock, interspersed with splashes of yellow gorse, is deliberately oppressive, with only a tiny section of sky at the very top right to give any relief to the beholder. The picture is, as a result, very shallow, all the action taking place in a gap between the picture plane and the rock wall down which the waterfall plunges. The presence of the horses and longcar strongly suggest that this is a road or track, again emphasizing that the assembled bodies stand in a shallow, almost depthless space. One result of this is the sense that the characters, horses and longcar seem continuous with the background of rocky cliff, a feeling stressed all the more by Yeats' inclusion of Duff, another character from Boucicault's play. In *The Shaughbraun* this figure, a government informant, dies by climbing up and throwing himself off a cliff, and thus he is represented here halfway up the rock face to the left of the waterfall. The manner in which he is barely distinguished from the stony drop he traverses only slightly intensifies Yeats' strategy elsewhere in the picture. Several of the other characters seem similarly petrified; witness the two individuals on the right of the picture, the baleful, shadowy coach-driver and the extraordinarily inhuman figure in green, her face an opaque mask to rival the redcoat's. Yeats deliberately blurs the boundaries between such characters and the cliff-face, flattening the picture through the continuity of his brushwork, so that his men and women seem to be at once merging into and materializing out of the mineral world.

In his consideration of both Watteau and Yeats, Beckett emphasizes juxtaposition as an important aspect of the compositional process. It may be that he is here recalling Will Grohmann's analyses of Klee and Picasso in Munich, when the curator and critic spoke of an art of the

simultaneous.⁴³ If so, then Beckett is seeing Yeats' and Watteau's figurative practices in a continuum with Klee's more obviously abstract practices. Yet where Grohmann is concerned to relate such contrasts to the creation of a virtual or abstract space, Beckett dwells on the way Yeats' and Watteau's juxtapositions return the viewer immediately to the physical. The opposition of two clotted heads, or the contrast between a figure and an urn, reveal the material hardness of the self in the world, not the opening of a portal to another one. Likewise the 'stillness' that Beckett refers to in his consideration of Yeats highlights the way that the painter's juxtapositions, and the variety and emphasis of his facture and colour, do not excite a kind of scintillation in the eye, as in Klee, but insist on the canvas itself as an autonomous, isolated object.

This is one of the most distinctive aspects of Beckett's thinking at this juncture: the formal juxtapositions of paint, colour and bodies are seen as a means of materializing the nature of the world: its brutal, unforgiving atomization, which in turn leads to the viewer's apprehension of their own petrified quality. Juxtaposition thus emphasizes an ontology of primordial separation, yet also acts as a common ground between painting and beholder. The latter recognizes his or her isolation in the former, but by the same token both must remain individual, sequestered monads. I reintroduce Leibniz's term here to stress again that the notion of juxtaposition that informs Beckett's understanding of abstraction is derived from the *Monadology*. Beckett's interpretation of Leibniz allows him to assert an ontology of total disconnection, with both the social and the material world seen as a mosaic of disconnected units, while also preserving (through Leibniz's notion of internal mirroring) the possibility of some minimal form of affiliation. Just as the man and woman in a Yeats painting are two isolated, autonomous monads, so the painting and its beholder are separated, and yet the recognition that occurs across the latter opposition suggests the possibility of a mutuality premised upon that very isolation and autonomy. We are thus very far from a Kantian schema whereby aesthetic experience attests to the freedom and authority of the subject. Rather the painting embodies the impenetrability of the world, and the subject's helpless solipsism before it, and yet that recognition itself sponsors a form of communication.

Beckett's first reference to Watteau in his discussions with MacGreevy occurs in a letter provisionally dated before 23 July. This roughly coincides with the period of the well-known 9 July 1937 letter to Axel Kaun.⁴⁴

⁴³ GD., II.2.37.

⁴⁴ Letter to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937, *LSBr*, pp. 516–521.

Beckett's concerns to relate Watteau's inorganic figures to Yeats' petrified ones can thus be linked to the Kaun letter's assertion of a highly formal, materialized art that nonetheless hints, negatively, at 'those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it'.⁴⁵ Indeed I will go so far as to say that the Kaun letter *must* be read in the light of Beckett's interest in visual art and the ideas he was working out in dialogue with MacGreevy at the time he wrote it. Intriguingly though, it is to neither Yeats nor Watteau that Beckett refers in the 9 July letter. Instead he makes what seems, initially at least, to be an approving reference to Lionel Feininger's work, which he compares to Gertrude Stein's writing:

Perhaps Gertrude Stein's logographs come closer to what I mean. The fabric of the language has at least become porous, if regrettably only by accident and, as it were, as a consequence of a procedure somewhat akin to the technique of Feininger.⁴⁶

Feininger's painting was an amalgam of German Expressionism and French Cubism, with the faceted, grid-like structures of the latter combined with the psychological distortions of the former. In his mature work he specialized in urban scenes, architectural studies, landscapes and seascapes. The amalgamation of the subjective, highly affective forms of Expressionism with the objective formal enquiries of Cubism renders the finished paintings much less challenging than the early landscapes of Braque and Picasso. Equally, however, the decorative, post-cubist qualities mitigate the psychological tension of classic expressionist painting by Kirchner or Schmitt-Rottluff. Feininger's work is thus very much of its time (i.e. the period of the *rappel à l'ordre*), in that formal experimentation is held in check, subordinated to familiar dramatic effects and subject-matter. It is perhaps this stepping back from avant-garde positions that accounts for Feininger's huge success in the United States after WWII. Beckett registers some of this in his comments on a Feininger exhibition at the Moritzberg in Halle that he saw on 23 January 1937, describing the pictures as 'all about 1930, & technique perhaps less interesting than the out-&-out "plane" technique of earlier Feininger, of which some examples here also'.⁴⁷

William Sinclair had had a Feininger hanging in the apartment in Kassel in the early 1930s. He also mentioned it in a letter from Dublin to Morris Sinclair in 1931, saying how he wished he was in the Sinclair apartment in Kassel 'looking at the Feininger across the piano'.⁴⁸ Whenever

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 518. ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 519. ⁴⁷ GD., 23.1.37. See Knowlson (2005), p. 85.

⁴⁸ UoR JEK D/1/7. Letter to Morris Sinclair, 20 May 1931.

he encountered a Feininger painting in Germany he always noted it, usually admiringly.⁴⁹ Sinclair lent the painting, along with several others, to the Städtische Galerie in Kassel in 1930, and according to loan documents unearthed by Knowlson it was called *Badende an der See*.⁵⁰ It is an example of what Beckett calls above the 'out-and-out plane technique', and typical of Beckett's taste in contemporary art in the late 1930s. Feininger represents sand and sea through a series of subtly shaded planes, mostly diamonds and diagonals, which are repeated in shapes of yachts and stylized, geometrical human bodies. The painting is figurative but not naturalistic, highly composed without being abstract, and can be read as a variant of the inorganicism that Beckett approves of in Watteau and Yeats. The interplay of figure and background also conforms to Beckett's interest in flattened, unified surfaces.

Beckett's relationship with Gertrude Stein is much less well-documented than his appreciation of Feininger. There is no mention of her at all prior to the Kaun letter, which makes her appearance there somewhat surprising. Two contexts for his interest suggest themselves, however. First, Stein was a writer who had self-consciously positioned her work alongside avant-garde painting over the previous several decades. The collection of modernist art that she had built up with her brother Leo was common knowledge in avant-garde circles, as was her close relationship with Picasso. She had composed two prose portraits of the artist and Picasso had in turn painted her.⁵¹ Furthermore, direct connections between Stein's writing practice and cubist technique in painting were being made as early as 1913 (by Mabel Dodge), and have continued ever since.⁵² In the light of all this, and given Beckett's recent immersion in contemporary art in Germany, his ongoing conversation with MacGreevy on Yeats, Watteau and juxtaposition, and the Kaun letter's general recourse to metaphors taken from painting in order to describe an ideal literary practice, the appeal to Stein begins to make more sense.

The second context for Beckett's reference to Stein in 1937 is *transition* and the Joyce circle. Alongside Joyce's *Work in Progress* Stein's work was, for a time, one of the magazine's most important features, and this is reflected by the way it often advertised forthcoming issues with reference to the appearance of texts by the two authors. Given this it is somewhat disingenuous for Beckett to write to Kaun that he cannot understand why Joyce and Stein are so often compared.⁵³

⁴⁹ But not always. See GD., 6.10.36. ⁵⁰ See Knowlson (2005), p. 67.

⁵¹ Stein (1993), pp. 464–466; Stein (1972), p. 333. ⁵² Dodge (1913), pp. 171–174.

⁵³ *LSBr*, pp. 519–520.

When examined in detail, the tone of Beckett's reference to both Stein and Feininger in the Kaun letter is less than wholly positive, however. Beckett says that Stein's work comes *close* to what he is looking for in literature, but qualifies this with two clauses: it does so '*regrettably* only by accident', and 'as a consequence of a procedure somewhat akin to the technique of Feininger'. The implication of the latter reservation is that the burden of Beckett's criticism is on Feininger, i.e. that Feininger's characteristic technique would not normally be conducive to the kinds of radical effects at which Beckett is himself aiming. That is to say, Stein's adoption of a Feininger-like practice suggests that her intentions are elsewhere, that she is concerned with conventionally aesthetic effects. On this reading, both Feininger and Stein are still, as Beckett puts it, 'in love with their vehicle', unable to subject their chosen media to the necessary 'scorn' that will produce the requisite 'dissonance of instrument and usage'.⁵⁴ Looking at paintings like Sinclair's *Badende* or the *Barfüßerkirche* from Halle, one can grasp the justice of this. These are subtle, numinous paintings, designed to produce an optical experience devoid of any affective extremity. Although Beckett enjoys Feininger's work, in other words, he thinks that it does not go far enough. To compare Stein's work with it is to understand the latter as playful, contemporary and stimulating, but still very much premised on traditional notions of aesthetic pleasure. And indeed the texts by Stein with which Beckett was most likely familiar, i.e. those published alongside his own work in *transition*, do deliver such familiar rewards.

Beckett was not the only figure in the mid-1930s who was sceptical about Stein's self-appointed position as the *ne plus ultra* of experimental poetics. The *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* had appeared in 1933 and had drawn criticism in experimental circles on two counts.⁵⁵ First, it was much more conventional in style than Stein's previous work, and second, it made a renewed and determined effort to position her as pivotal to the modernist revolutions of the earlier part of the century, Cubism in particular. It was also a mainstream success, never something to excite the approval of the avant-garde. One direct response was the publication in February 1935, as a supplement to *transition* 23, of 'Testimony against Gertrude Stein'. Organized and introduced by Eugene Jolas, this consisted of short pieces by Braque, Matisse, Tristan Tzara and the art critic and poet André Salmon, in which they challenged various statements in the book and, as they saw it, set the record straight.⁵⁶ Braque, for example,

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 519.

⁵⁵ Stein (2001).

⁵⁶ Braque et al. (1935).

starts by stating bluntly that 'Miss Stein understood nothing of what went on around her', and goes on to say 'she has entirely misunderstood cubism which she sees entirely in terms of personalities'.⁵⁷ Tzara meanwhile concludes by dismissing all those who indulge in 'politely esthetic games'.⁵⁸

Taken together these quotations suggest the coordinates for Beckett's unusual comparison of Stein to Feininger. A much more obvious parallel to Stein's tactics in the contemporary visual arts would have been Picasso himself. That is to say, if Beckett is attracted to a Cubist legacy in Stein, as implied through his comparison with Feininger's 'out-and-out plane technique', why not go back to the master as a point of comparison? The answer can only be that, like Braque and Tzara, Beckett thinks that Stein's work, although undoubtedly in some sort of relationship with cubism, diminishes the radicality of the original Cubist impetus. By saying that Stein's technique is akin to Feininger's, in other words, he is implying that it is *not* akin to Picasso's early painting, which was the more conventional, indeed by then almost clichéd, point of comparison for Stein's work.

It is not too much to say that through this strange displacement Picasso haunts the Kaun letter, as an example of the kind of truly avant-garde practice that Stein fails to carry through, and to which Beckett aspires. This ambition can also be illustrated by a letter to Mary Manning two days later, where Beckett implicitly contrasts Stein's 'logography', as he calls it in the Kaun letter, with his own more radical ambitions for a 'logoclasm' that would 'make the void protrude, like a hernia'.⁵⁹ Such a notion of technique, as that which violently disrupts regular function in order to reveal what is normally hidden, constitutes Beckett's bid to go beyond both Joyce and Stein to try to rival in writing the painterly avant-garde of the beginning of the century. Indeed one of the central questions of Cubism, the relation between surface and depth, becomes central to what Beckett proposes. But in order to tease out Beckett's understanding of this relationship, we must first look more closely at his use of imagery as he writes to his German friend.

About halfway through the letter Beckett turns to a favourite metaphor for the artistic act, one which we have seen appear in *Dream, More Pricks than Kicks* and other texts, almost always in the context of the visual arts. This is the notion of aesthetic activity as an engagement with a material surface, with the painter's canvas acting as a paradigm. The letter's earliest reference to this surface calls it 'a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it'. Towards the

⁵⁷ Braque et al. (1935), p. 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *LSBI*, n. 8, p. 521.

end of the same paragraph, however, the veil metaphor is transformed into something rather harder, wood perhaps, as Beckett describes his ambition 'to drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through'. Finally, there is a shift to a musical analogy, although the references to blackness retain a trace of a strongly visual imagination, as does the explicit evocation of a substantial surface, when Beckett advances the possibility of a writing that dissolves that 'terrifyingly arbitrary materiality of the word surface'.⁶⁰

It is this consistent sense of a surface torn, drilled though or devoured which is then picked up again in the context of Stein's work, where according to Beckett, the fabric of language has 'at least become porous'. Attending closely to the logic of the imagery here, we can see a distinction between such a treatment of language and the much more radical and violent processes outlined earlier. To say that Stein's language has become porous is to suggest that the texture of the word surface retains its integrity. A piece of fabric can be porous without being torn, dissolved or compromised in any other way. The difference between Stein's 'logographics' and Beckett's desired 'logoclasm' thus becomes clear: the latter involves a much more radical disturbance of the conventional relationship between word and meaning, surface and depth.

It is worth turning for assistance here to Beckett's slightly later *transition* review of Denis Devlin's poems, where there are suggestive echoes of the Kaun text.⁶¹ Given the reappearance in the review of the Dives-Lazarus opposition, it comes as no surprise that the names Beckett introduces to illustrate his argument are not poets but painters: 'Braque's [need] is not Munch's, neither's is Klee's'. The exemplary role played here by Munch and Klee is unremarkable given Beckett's recent sojourn in Germany. The presence of Braque is more interesting. There are allusions to the painter in *Dream* and *Murphy*, and he will play a prominent role in Beckett's art criticism immediately after the war. But the reference also resonates with the Kaun letter's subterranean engagement with Cubist form. Indeed the review's link with the Kaun letter is confirmed when Beckett argues that one of Devlin's distinctive achievements lies in his articulation of surface and depth: 'the insistence with which the ground invades the surface throughout is quite extraordinary . . . Passages which even on a fourth or fifth reading seemed to sag, as even the most competent linkwriting is bound to sag, eventually tighten into line with those of more immediate evidence'.⁶² Tellingly, Beckett here conflates the figure-ground opposition

⁶⁰ *LSBI*, pp. 518–519.

⁶¹ Beckett (1938), pp. 289–294.

⁶² Beckett (1938), p. 293.

with the surface-depth one, bringing together the two sets of polarities in a manner that allows the phrase to connect with a network of images and statements that goes back as far as *Dream*. The idea of a ground invading a surface carries with it a charge of violence, while the import of the phrase in general recalls Cubism's play with perspective, where the deployment of traces of illusionistic modelling and broken contours make it very difficult to grasp whether a specific passage is figure or ground. As a result, the experience of attending to such a painting involves a constant recalibration of the gaze, as elements oscillate between depth and surface depending on their relations with contiguous sections. Here Beckett translates Cubism's perceptual play into the more cognitive occasion of textual interpretation, arguing that certain passages in Devlin's poems, lines that seem to exist merely to connect other, more immediately graspable images, can themselves resolve unpredictably into important moments in the text. The review's metaphors of sagging and tightening give a sense of the page as a mosaic of discrete elements, whose immediacy or distance from the reader is in constant negotiation. This sense of the composite nature of Devlin's poems points forward to the ways in which 'boring into', or otherwise breaching the materiality of language itself, might be actually carried out in practice, and suggests the relevance of the cubist model for such a project. Importantly, the key technique seems again to be juxtaposition between elements, and the consequent production of difference between them. And so in all four of the examples of juxtaposition considered in this chapter – Yeats' and Watteau's paintings, the Kaun letter and the Devlin review – the emphasis is on a disjunction between heterogeneous elements that disassembles a single art surface.

Beckett's description of such tactics, in the Kaun letter, as a form of 'ironic nominalism' summons another figure from the Parisian avant-garde of the early part of the century, someone with whom Beckett would soon have very close relations: Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp saw his own work as a form of nominalism, as is clear from the following note, written in 1914

Nominalism [literal] = No more generic, specific numeric distinction between words (tables is not the plural of table, ate has nothing in common with eat). No more physical adaptation of concrete words; no more conceptual value of abstract words. The word also loses its musical value. It is only readable (due to being made up of consonants and vowels), it is readable by eye and little by little takes on a form of plastic significance.

This plastic being of the word (by literal nominalism) differs from the plastic being of any form whatever . . . in that the grouping of several words

without significance, reduced to literal nominalism, is independent of the interpretation. ie that (cheek, amyl, phaedra) for example has not plastic value in the sense of: these three words drawn by Y are different from the same three words drawn by X.⁶³

The first thing to note here is the fact that Duchamp concentrates on nominalism and the word, just as Beckett does. The reference to the 'plastic' also speaks to Beckett's repeated use of that idea in the 1930s and later. Thierry de Duve calls Duchamp's use of nominalism an 'ironic asceticism', one that is opposed to the 'idealist efflorescence' of abstract painting, with the latter embodied by Kandinsky, and his assertions of an essentialized colour theory in *On the Spiritual in Art*.⁶⁴ Duchamp's desire, as de Duve puts it, is to: 'specify those conditions that in his eyes allow the word to remain in its zero degree, force it into the realm of nonlanguage and, since it is a question here of plastic language, into nonart, and reduce to nothing its speaking intentions'.⁶⁵ Duchamp's nominalism is thus a reaction to Kandinsky's late-symbolist aesthetic, itself based on a notion of authentic identity between word and colour that recalls the sensuous intellection of his contemporaries Pound and Eliot. When Duchamp argues that the word reduced to 'literal nominalism' is 'independent of the interpretation', he means that a word divorced from both concept and referent is incapable of being subjectivized. As de Duve puts this: 'we have to understand the word interpretation in the same sense as it has in music – that of a particular execution of a work. Thus the sequence cheek, amyl, phaedra, for example, would not be different if drawn by X rather than Y. And the drawer of the word would not be its author . . . but, at most, its executor'. Duchamp is trying to imagine an ascetic art practice where signs are directly presented, without falling into representation and thus interpretation. As he goes on: 'at each reproduction, the reproducer *presents* . . . once again, without interpretation, the group of words, and finally no longer expresses a work of art'.⁶⁶ Like Beckett, here Duchamp is sceptically grappling with one of modernist aesthetics' oldest dreams, the dream of a direct presentation of the real. But where Kandinsky et al. imagined such an art in redemptive form, as an authentic communion between self and world, for Duchamp it is finally achieved in the impersonal tokens of meaningless signs. The highest goal of art is achieved through art's abolition.

⁶³ Duchamp (1980), # 185.

⁶⁴ de Duve (1996), p. 126.

⁶⁵ de Duve (1996), p. 127.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Duchamp's proposal is an ironic one, because such an absolute reduction of the word to pure material, the zero-degree of the real, no matter who expresses it, no matter who reads it, is impossible. The true import of Duchamp's note is its conceptual play with modernist aesthetic norms, the desire to subvert and transgress them. In this respect there are many remarkable parallels between Duchamp's note on nominalism, the Kaun letter and *Watt*, the novel that would finally attempt to put into practice the principles that Beckett sketched out for his German friend: nominalism, language subjected to a brutal reduction, an animus against interpretation, a general sense of language as a permutational, material machine. There is no real evidence that Beckett knew Duchamp before 1937, but in conversation with Juliet he remarked that on his move to Paris he saw a lot of the French artist, and his contacts with Duchamp during the war are well known.⁶⁷ In any case I am not necessarily arguing here for direct influence. Rather, in a context where the avant-gardes of the early century are making themselves felt (through the Kaun letter's references to Stein, Braque, Picasso etc.), it is no surprise that a tactic associated with one of the most radical figures of that period should be referred to. The appeal to an 'ironic nominalism' at the end of Beckett's letter confirms it as a highly belated text, one that mines a previous moment of avant-garde experiment in order to find possible pathways into the future. What Stein, Braque, Picasso and Duchamp provide, in their various ways, is a sense of the stubborn, resistant presence of the canvas or word as a resource, and in this their presence within the text of the letter provides an essential context for Beckett's highly materialist reading of Yeats and Watteau slightly later in the year. More than this, Beckett's reading of figurative painting through an explicitly avant-garde lineage provides an important frame of reference for the writing of *Watt*. It is to this novel, and its many visual intertexts, that we now turn.

⁶⁷ Juliet (1995), p.150.

Impossible Image
Watt and Failed Ekphrasis

Watt has a claim to be Beckett's most experimental and challenging work of the period up to *How It Is*. As research into the extensive manuscript has shown, the compositional process was attenuated, and involved furious editing and revision.¹ Much of this involved the detachment of the text from an initial engagement with a much more traditional style of writing that, while not exactly realist, had affinities with realism. Importantly, Beckett is careful to ensure that the traces of this process of detachment are still present in the finished text. Indeed the novel as published makes clear at various points that it is quarried, transcribed and translated from a larger manuscript, and it does this through inconsistencies, textual lacunae, narrative asides, editorial intrusion and the inclusion of a list of addenda that could not find a place in the main text due to 'fatigue and disgust'.²

In other words, Beckett very clearly marks the materiality of his text. Significantly, this happens not only through indexical signals to an absent archive, but also through the heterogeneity of the elements of which the book is composed: musical scores, paratactic lists and permutations, footnotes, sections that invert word and letter order, and of course the three major ekphrastic moments with which we will be interested here. This is what Byron and Ackerley call 'the uneven surface structure of the text', and it is through this material surface that the novel constantly questions its own presence and gestures beyond it.³ Such a relationship between the surface of the text and its own interruption of the conventions of literary communication recalls Beckett's sense of the way Jack B. Yeats' material surfaces 'suspend the performance' of the subject-object, artefact-beholder relation. For it is through writing *Watt* that Beckett finally manages to put into practice an approach to the 'art surface' that has been incrementally building since *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. This is a practice that

¹ Byron and Ackerley (2015), pp. 32–48.

² Beckett (1998), p. 247, n. 1.

³ Byron and Ackerley (2015), p. 32.

reveals the word surface's 'terrible materiality'. The text dissolves through a version of the juxtapositional technique that Beckett had been tracing through Watteau, Yeats and Feininger in 1937. In doing so it acknowledges and dramatizes the 'impassible immensity' between artist and viewer, writer and reader, by reinscribing that impasse into the form of the artwork itself, thereby opening up a common ground that is by turns both alienating and absorbing.

Beckett begins the first of the five *Watt* manuscript notebooks on 'the evening of Tuesday 11/2/41' and dates the final page of the last one 'Dec 28 1944', although he will continue to work on the novel until May the next year.⁴ In January 1945 he also writes his first text in French: an introduction to the brothers Van Velde, the two Dutch painters with whom he had become friendly in the last years of the 1930s.⁵ When it is published in *Cahiers d'Art* in October 1946, it marks the beginning of a period when Beckett will be immersed in the Parisian art world. Yet it also points back to the period just before the war, when Beckett was deeply involved in London's avant-garde circles. Beckett had been instrumental in securing Geer van Velde's first exhibition in London at Peggy Guggenheim's Guggenheim-Jeune in May 1938, travelling from Paris to attend the opening, writing a short introductory note for the catalogue and lending a painting by Van Velde of his own. He had also translated Jean Cocteau's preface for the catalogue of the new venue's first show, an exhibition of the French artist's drawings and set designs, which took place in January. Exhibitions by Kandinsky and others followed, with Guggenheim's close friend Marcel Duchamp advising, particularly on a sculpture show of summer 1938.⁶ Although he was already living in Paris, then, Beckett's pre-war engagement with Guggenheim's short-lived enterprise is relatively intensive. Before examining *Watt*'s ekphrases, I want to examine this milieu in more detail, as it provides an important context for some of the new techniques and strategies that Beckett begins to practice while composing the novel.

Guggenheim-Jeune, its name imitating that of the venerable Bernheim-Jeune to emphasize connections with Paris, was situated on Cork Street alongside the Mayor Gallery and E. L. T. Mesens' London Gallery. It was from the latter that Mesens, a Belgian surrealist, co-edited *The London*

⁴ See Pilling (1997), p. 177.

⁵ 'La Peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon', *Cahiers d'Art*, 20–21 (1945–1946), pp. 349–356. Rpt. in Beckett (1983), pp. 118–132.

⁶ Moure (2009), p. 155.

Bulletin, alongside the English writer and film-maker Humphrey Jennings. *The Bulletin* carried advertisements for Guggenheim-Jeune exhibitions and often printed their catalogue essays too. The two galleries and magazine constitute, alongside the Mayor Gallery and Zwemmers Bookshop and Gallery, an important base for the London avant-garde of the period, certainly in terms of painting and sculpture.

Like Guggenheim's exhibition space, Mesens' *Bulletin* was avowedly cosmopolitan, and in particularly close contact with contemporary developments on the continent. This is reflected in the way Mesens and Jennings position the magazine as a Surrealist publication, despite it carrying a broad range of avant-garde material from other tendencies, including abstract painting. Beckett contributed a translation of André Breton's essay on the surrealist (and friend of Beckett's) Wolfgang Paalen, and also tried, unsuccessfully, to place three poems.⁷ His short catalogue essay for the van Velde exhibition appears in May 1938. George Reavey also features regularly, writing poems, essays and reviews, and almost every issue carries a large advertisement for his Europa Press, in which Beckett's *Echo's Bones* is listed prominently, alongside books by his friends Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey. *The Bulletin* would also regularly include a full-page appeal for subscriptions, in which Beckett was always prominently listed as a noted contributor.

Beckett was interested in surrealism in the 1930s in the same way that most avant-gardists were, because it was seen as the latest manifestation of the kind of insurgent artistic movement that had unleashed the work of Picasso and Duchamp in the early part of the century. Yet he also had reservations about the surrealist project – and Breton's assertion of the priority of the unfettered imagination in particular – that never left him. Having said that, Breton's position was far from completely sclerotic, and his essay on 'The Crisis of the Object', published in 1936, had suggested a new attitude towards the relationship between the real and the image.⁸ This is Beckett's territory too, as we have seen, and whether he read the essay or not it is significant that *Watt*, his most sustained investigation of the subject-object dilemma to date, employs techniques that, while they can be likened to Duchamp's nominalism, also have roots in surrealist procedures associated with the documentary impulse.

To speak of surrealism in the same breath as the documentary would seem to problematically conflate two major strands of 1930s literary and artistic culture. Surrealism, dedicated to the oneiric and the erotic, is above

⁷ See Nixon (2014), pp. 282–305.

⁸ Breton (1972).

all concerned with the world's hallucinatory transfiguration, while the documentary movement, in film and literature primarily, is commonly associated with a rigorous fidelity to the real. Yet in some ways this is a misreading. In *Amour Fou*, Breton remarked of extreme mental states that 'surrealism has always suggested they be written like a medical report, with no incident omitted, no name altered, lest the arbitrary make its appearance. The revelation of the immediate, bewildering irrationality of certain events requires the most severe authentication of the human document conveying them.'⁹ Dali similarly relied on a forensic realism in his pursuit of the impossible, as set out most clearly in his early essay 'Documentary - Paris - 1929'.¹⁰

As David Lomas has argued, this surrealist investment in ideas of objectivity manifests itself in an interest in recording devices of various kinds, as if the documentation of the unreal demanded mechanisms of inhuman precision and discrimination.¹¹ In language, too, a new rigour was called for, the kind of writing that forgoes the subjective and the symbolic in favour of the forensic and (to recall Beckett's description of Jack B. Yeats) the 'dispassionate'. One resource for this was the prose poem, which saw a remarkable efflorescence in surrealist literature of the 1920s and 1930s. Another was the experimental essay. In both cases techniques that served to distance the text from the subjective and push it into an impersonal terrain were assiduously applied. These included formal devices such as listing, repetition and abbreviation but also, and perhaps more importantly, the appropriation of non-literary genres such as the court report, the medical document, the phrasebook, the blueprint and the instruction manual. Beckett himself had experience of the poetic potential of such procedural texts, for in 1932 he translated three examples for the special surrealist issue of the little magazine *This Quarter*, the first real exposition of surrealism in English, which would initiate the movement in Britain.¹² These were Eluard and Breton's 'Simulation of Mental Debility Essayed'; 'Simulation of General Paralysis Essayed' and 'Simulation of the Delirium of Interpretation Essayed', all taken from *L'Immaculée Conception* of 1930.¹³ Although Breton and Eluard claimed in their

⁹ Breton (1987), p. 39. ¹⁰ See Finkelstein (1996), pp. 73–77.

¹¹ Lomas (2004), pp. 627–650. See also Walker (2002).

¹² Breton and Eluard (1969), pp. 119–174. For more on Beckett's relations with the magazine and its owner see Lois More Overbeck, 'Edward W. Titus at the Sign of the Black Manikin and *This Quarter*' in Nixon (2011a), pp. 23–34. For the impact of the issue in England see Jackman (1989), pp. 28–33.

¹³ Breton, Eluard and Soupault (1997), p. 175.

original introduction to these 'essays' that they had not borrowed from clinical texts, the basic idea of a transcription of extreme mental states obviously owes something to psychiatric practice.

Four of Marcel Duchamp's 'Notes' for *The Great Glass* also appeared in the Surrealist issue of *This Quarter*, the first time any of this preparatory material had seen the light. They were translated by Jacob Bronowski, who had been a member of the Cambridge avant-garde 'Experiment' group alongside Humphrey Jennings and other contributors to *The Bulletin*. We will be returning to Duchamp in a moment. Finally, the issue also carried Dalí's essays 'The Stinking Ass' and 'The Object as revealed in Surrealist Experiment'.¹⁴

Tyrus Miller points out that examples of the documentary form employed to estranging effect can often be found in the pages of *The London Bulletin*. Indeed Miller argues that the combination of the documentary and the surreal was, in some ways, carried further in Britain than in France.¹⁵ The main vehicle for such experiment was not *The Bulletin* itself, but the associated grouping Mass Observation, whose members included Jennings alongside other surrealists associated with the London Gallery such as Charles Madge and David Gascoyne. This organization combined a surrealist interest in Freud, popular culture and myth with anthropological practices of participatory research. The aim was to construct a kind of inventory of collective behaviour, and the first publication, in 1937, was a collaged account of Coronation Day, *May the Twelfth*.¹⁶ Miller persuasively links this book with other texts or 'Reports' that Jennings published in the same period that, like the Mass Observation work, seem to repurpose academic or scientific discursive models so that, while making 'claims to reality', they also defamiliarize or estrange the real.

Miller also makes the shrewd point that Jennings' 'Reports' read rather more conventionally than the Mass Observation document: they are clearly literary and overtly hermeneutic, relying on images that solicit allegorical interpretation. Although contemporaries saw a resemblance between the way Jennings seemed to graft found texts into his reports and Marcel Duchamp's readymades, Miller points out that their 'hermeneutic' aspect distances them from Duchamp's position. In the four notes published alongside Beckett's translations in the Surrealist *This Quarter*, for example, Duchamp had described *The Great Glass* as an attempt to

¹⁴ Breton and Paul (1969), pp. 49–54, 197–207.

¹⁵ Miller (2002), pp. 226–241.

¹⁶ Jennings and Madge (1937).

engineer the production of allegory, a kind of engine that pumps out arbitrary meaning in a mechanical, inhuman manner.¹⁷ It is this that distances Duchamp's approach from a certain kind of Surrealist poetics which, not least through its Freudian investments, is premised on a very different model. Such a distinction also marks the gulf between Beckett's position and Jennings', as we shall see.

That Beckett was aware of Jennings' work is apparent from a letter to Thomas MacGreevy of 15 June 1938, where he writes gnomically that Jennings' 'article in the last Bulletin was in the best traditionalist tradition'.¹⁸ He is referring here to an essay in issue No. 3, where Jennings reflects upon issues of abstraction, the inhuman, subjectivity, the real and representation that accord with Beckett's own recent concerns.¹⁹ The essay describes the position of the conventional abstract painter, using Willi Baumeister as an example (as did Beckett when describing Ballmer's *Kopf in Rot*; indeed Baumeister appears often in the German Diaries). Jennings writes: 'The so-called "abstract" painter identifies himself or the person in his picture with a machine (Cp. Baumeister: "Nous savons que la croute terrestre a reçu un humus nouveau: les machines" etc)'.²⁰ Note that it is not geometric abstraction in the Mondrian or later Kandinsky mode that is being described here, but rather the form of stylized figuration, influenced by both Cubism and the Bauhaus, that was typified in the period by Baumeister and Léger. Beckett admired such work in the diaries, although he suspected its service of larger political ideals, preferring Ballmer's subjective approach.²¹ Unlike Beckett, Jennings does not contrast this kind of painting with a more expressionist art, however, but with the 'anti-artistic creation of pseudo-machines by Duchamp, Picabia' and others. As we saw at the end of the [previous chapter](#), Beckett too was being drawn to such anti-artistic tactics.

Jennings then moves immediately to writing, asking the reader to compare two passages. The first of these is taken from a 1769 letter by James Watt concerning the Kinneil engine. It is a meticulous description of the components of the machine, and their relationship with each other.

¹⁷ Duchamp (1932), pp. 189–192. See pp. 189–190: 'we shall determine the conditions for an instantaneous position of Rest (or allegorical appearance) of a sequence [of a set] of small happenings appearing to necessitate one another under causal laws'.

¹⁸ Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 15 June 1938, *LSBI*, pp. 629–633, p. 629.

¹⁹ Jennings (1938), pp. 22–28. ²⁰ Baumeister (1931), pp. 215–216.

²¹ GD., 29.10.36. For example he praised Baumeister's work as 'peaceful and strong' comparing his 'Mensch als Machind' to Michaelangelo's *David*, and describing his style as 'flat, abstract and geometrical'.

The second is an extract from Duchamp's notes for *The Great Glass*. A brief extract will give the flavour:

[t]he pulse needle in addition to its vibratory movement is mounted on a wandering leash. It has the liberty of caged animals – on condition that it will provide (by its vibratory movement actuating the sex cylinder) the ventilation on the pole (at the drum).²²

Jennings' point that Duchamp here imitates a kind of technical writing is obvious. More interesting is the conclusion that he draws from this: 'the point of creating pseudo machines was not as an exploitation of machinery but as a "profanation" of "Art"'.²³ Contrary to Baumeister's utopian technophilia, then, where the machine is seen as an agent of a new heaven and a new earth, Duchamp harnesses a ruthlessly trenchant, schematic and materialist mode of positivist description to examine, in the case of *The Great Glass*, the affective and emotional field of desire. Significantly, Jennings sees an analogue to this in Cézanne's relationship with geological discourses, quoting the passage from Gasquet's 'What he told me ...', where the painter describes how he sees landscape: 'slowly geological foundations appear to me, the layers form themselves, the great planes on my canvas. I mentally design the rocky skeleton'.²⁴ Here, according to Jennings, technical vision enters the conventional artistic gaze and 'profanes' it, allowing a new purchase on the real. Cézanne continues: 'The red earths rise from an abyss. I begin to separate myself from the landscape, to see it. With the first sketch, I detach myself from these geological lines. Geometry measures the earth.'

This technical profanation of art is, as Jennings puts it, 'parallel to the engineers' "profanation" of the primitive "sacred places" of the earth'. Jennings' exhilaration as he compares Cézanne's searching forensic gaze with the much-debated effects of the spread of motorways, housing and light industry into British the countryside is palpable. The aesthetic is the familiar one, celebrating the liberating violence of modernity, reminiscent of pre-War Vorticism. Hence Duchamp's ascetic, cool and ironic gaze is evoked but in a way that is allied with the interests of an English avant-garde with its own heritage. This is the context in which Beckett's rejection of Jennings' essay as 'in the best traditionalist tradition' demands to be read. Jennings' version of the avant-garde is all too familiar to Beckett, and he has been as consistently sceptical about its versions of truth, heroism and vitality as he has been about the high modernist iterations of these ideas.

²² Jennings (1938), p. 25. My translation.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See Doran (2001), p. 144.

Having said this, it would be a mistake to discount a defensively competitive quality to Beckett's reaction to several aspects of Jennings' ideas, for they have much in common with his own. Let us for a moment compare 'The Iron Horse' with Beckett's thinking at this point. Jennings' description of his aesthetic suggests a violent, radical assault on conventional art. Specifically, his parallel between an engineer penetrating the earth and the artist profaning the artwork recalls Beckett's desire to drill one hole after another into language in order to 'scorn' it. Also there are two extensive quotations in 'The Iron Horse', one from Duchamp and one from Cézanne, and I have been arguing at various points in this book that these two figures also haunt Beckett's aesthetics. Most interesting is the way Jennings' association of Cezanne's structural gaze with Duchamp's technical vision translates the art-critical notion of the plastic into terms applicable to writing. 'The Iron Horse' does not mention the term itself, but the 'plastic' insights of Cezanne's painting, as theorized by Fry and others, are famously summed up in the painter's own image of how he 'mentally designs the rocky skeleton' through 'the planes on my canvas'. By bringing Duchamp into the equation, however, Jennings moves Cezanne away from organic empathy and rereads him in anti-humanist terms that 'profane' the earth. The plastic is transformed from a vital, immanent, structuring inner sense that it is Cezanne's genius to reveal on canvas to an impersonal, material, machinic activity. Between the Cezanne letters of late 1935 and the Kaun letter of 1937, Beckett has been developing a very similar aesthetic, one that is eventually thematized in Watt's 'plastic' vision of the Galls.

If we grant these similarities, then two points follow immediately. First, it becomes clear that, to some extent at least, Beckett's aesthetic thought, as he moves into the period of the war years, takes place within a matrix of ideas and influences that he shares with his contemporaries in London. Second, it is equally apparent that *Watt*, the text that Beckett goes on to write in the war years, despite sharing its title with the author of one of Jennings' models of technical writing, differs considerably from English avant-garde texts of the period by Jennings and others. It is in an effort to define these differences that I want to turn to a text that Beckett wrote just as he was finishing *Watt* and which provides an insight into his attitudes towards Surrealism and the avant-garde at a distance of five years from his involvement with *The London Bulletin*. The essay is 'La Peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon'. We will be looking in detail at the essay in the [next chapter](#), but for the moment I want to concentrate on just one strand of its argument.

In 'le Monde et le Pantalon' Beckett makes reference to 'willed creative mismaking' ('malfaçon créatrice voulue') as an essential component of his friend Bram van Velde's avant-garde armoury. After raising the issue of the artist that renounces a specific skill, and how such a tactic is to be valued, Beckett considers the difficulties that the deliberate cultivation of naivety or bad taste offers for 'practical aesthetics':

[t]his calls forth vast and shadowy problems of practical aesthetics; I speak of those that refer to the pompier, the hypo-pompier, the hyper-pompier and the deliberately pompier, to their reciprocal relationships and zones of cleavage, and, generally, to the legitimacy of, pardon me, to the opportunity of, willed creative mismaking.

He is told: 'Dali, that's pompier. He couldn't do anything else.'²⁵

Beckett conducts his argument for the continued relevance of the avant-garde in the post-war period through a critique of the standard terminology of the art criticism of the time. The term *pompier*, or 'fireman', has its origins in the nineteenth century, when it was a derisory term for classically inspired academic painting in which the 'Roman' helmets that some of the figures wore looked very much like those of Parisian firemen. In the 1930s it came into currency again as 'a general term of abuse for artists or movements not committed to modernist formal innovation (including, later, both Surrealism and Socialist Realism)'.²⁶ By evoking Dali, Beckett makes it clear here that he is engaging with the term's association with surrealism.

Dali himself drew attention to his admiration for nineteenth-century academic painters, and in particular Ernest Meissonier, proclaiming in 1933, in an open letter to Breton that marked the beginning of their long quarrel: 'I suddenly think with beating heart of Napoleon at the head of his army, in the Russian campaign, the horses with all their regulation straps in this snow of light . . . that covers the landscape "the way" Meissonier painted it in a well-known and immortal picture.'²⁷ As Roger Rothman points out, Dali is deliberately provoking Breton here, both aesthetically and politically. Beckett's defence of Dali in 1946 is similarly heretical. And yet the deliberate citation of populist styles of image-making, in order to

²⁵ Beckett (1983), p. 122.

²⁶ Adamson and Norris (2009), pp. 1–24, p. 14. See also in the same volume, Mark Antliff's 'Classicism: Neither Left nor Right: The *Combat* Group and the Cultural Politics of French Fascism during the 1930s', pp. 169–190, p. 175, where he points to the use of the term by Thierry Maulnier.

²⁷ See Rothman (2012), p. 116. See also Dali (1967).

challenge hierarchies of taste, is a familiar avant-garde strategy, as Beckett is well aware. His list of variations on the term *pompier* draws attention to the problems such a strategy raises for questions of authenticity and intention, taste and authority. According to Beckett, then, the critical claim that Dali is 'pompier' because he 'couldn't do anything else' is misplaced, ignorant, even. Such a claim ignores the whole issue of the status of the art object raised by both the Dadaists and the Surrealists. It assumes that art can be judged according to traditional criteria of originality and taste and ignores the question of what has more recently been called 'deskilling'.²⁸ In effect, Beckett is reflecting on the possibilities for what he calls 'practical aesthetics' of intentionally crude, vulgar or tasteless elements.

It is worth remembering here that Beckett has only lately finished *Watt*, a novel that uses documentary or technical writing in ways that overtly challenge the decorum of the literary and its canons of value. Indeed the relationship between such deliberately rebarbative passages, and the various other genres that the novel deploys, could be understood in the terms that Beckett applies to Dali in his essay. The following is particularly relevant in this respect:

[w]hy wouldn't he [Dali] make the pompier deliberately, if that's what he's at? Couldn't we conceive of the pompier and the non-pompier reunited, one at the service of the other? Would the prose of the Princess of Elis be as beautiful, if there were no versification? Do Claude's landscapes really owe nothing to staffage?²⁹

The reference to Molière's comedy-ballet is again out of character. As we have seen, where classic French drama is concerned Beckett usually gravitates towards Racinian tragedy rather than its frivolous opposite. Yet the remark is apt; it is a play that not only alternates between prose and verse, but also contains interludes of dance and song, hybridizing the dramatic, the choral, the scenic and the choreographic. Beckett emphasizes this quality of juxtaposition and, importantly, its central role in regulating the viewer's response. Molière's rambunctious, undistinguished verse points up the plangency of other passages just as Claude's stock, anonymous figures highlight the vividly realized textures of his landscapes. The emphasis is on a contrast between different moments across a work, whether text or picture, a contrast defined by, in the case of Molière, beautiful prose and programmatic verse and, in the case of Claude, serene landscape and functional figures. The stress falls, in other words, on what

²⁸ Roberts (2008).

²⁹ Beckett (1983), p. 122.

Beckett calls 'reciprocal relationships and zones of cleavage' between different styles and forms, a description which could be easily transferred to *Watt*.

Dali is not a painter that Beckett routinely makes reference to, and so his choice of the Spanish artist as exemplar here bears investigation.³⁰ The Spanish artist's experiments with realist image-making juxtapose passages of accurate mimesis that would not have been out of place in more mainstream painting with extreme images that are all the more powerful because of the convincing means of their realization. Dali himself associated this procedure with the documentary form, 'a violently anti-artistic tendency is defined in the uncontrolled impulse towards documentary', as he put it.³¹ He also claimed to have learned much from Vermeer's meticulous detail.³² It is as a result of this sensitivity to the possibilities of derangement *within* realist representation that Dali was able to negotiate the transition from pre-War avant-gardist to post-War international celebrity with such ease and aplomb, for the new image-world of the 1950s and 1960s, of television and advertising, operated along a similar continuum. In Dali's hands, surrealism's interest in precise documentation segues into the realms of nightmare and delirium, without any discernible transition point. It is this lack of attention to the materiality of the medium, Dali's ironic commitment to illusionism and the painting as transparent window, that marks his break with modernism and allows his co-optation by the post-War culture industry.

Beckett's neologism 'hyper-pompier' is extraordinarily prescient as a description of this aspect of Dali's painting. Indeed the excessively realist detail, subsequently removed or attenuated, of the early manuscript notebooks of *Watt* might be said to have the same relation to realism as Dali's work has to pompier painting. Just as Dali appropriates the celebrated detail and optical effects of Meissonnier's history paintings, so in *Watt* Beckett purloins Balzac's metonymic eye, though in both cases the intent is to question the real that nineteenth-century fiction and painting appeared to describe and confirm. One moment that throws light on this parallel between Beckett's and Dali's relation to realist precursors occurs during the Galls episode, when the music room is described:

³⁰ As well as the Dali essays in *This Quarter*, Beckett would have read the painter's essays in *Minotaure*. We know that he had a copy of the double edition 3–4 of 1933, which included Dali's 'De la Beauté Terrifiante et Comestible, de l'Architecture Modern Style' on pp. 73–74. But Beckett also possessed several other issues, and thus may have read, for example, Dali (1933a), p. 65, or one of several other essays he published in *Minotaure*.

³¹ Quoted in Fanés (2007), p. 115.

³² In 1937 Dali called Vermeer 'Surrealism Integral'. See Rothman (2012), p. 114.

[t]he music room was a large, bare white room. The piano was in the window. The head, and neck, in plaster, very white, of Buxtehude, was on the mantelpiece. A ravanastron hung, on the wall, from a nail, like a plover.³³

The suggestion that the ravanastron hangs beside the piano in the music room 'like a plover' alludes to the Dutch genre of the hunting still life, paintings like Jan Weenix's *Dead Partridge Hanging from a Nail*. The redundant specificity of Beckett's 'from a nail' reinforces the connection with painting, as the phrase is often included in the title of such pictures. These images of game were not only realist but illusionistic, specifically designed to blend with the wall on which they hung, in order to trick the eye. Detection of the reference in the novel thus alerts the reader to the possibility of illusion, if not delusion, on Watt's part. Is he seeing a ravanastron, or is he seeing a plover? Is he seeing a plover or is he seeing a painting of a plover? It is impossible to tell, and this can be the only object of the inclusion of the reference. Beckett is using an ostensibly realist detail ironically here, in order to trouble and undermine our faith in what we are being told.

This moment connects to a more pervasive sense that Watt's perspective on Knott's house, its inhabitants and contents, is corrupted or infected by a compulsively ekphrastic gaze that confuses the real and the unreal. Time and again Watt throws the veracity of the scenes he describes into doubt. The visit of the Galls, for example, already considered in my Introduction, seems strongly to suggest that Watt experiences the world formally, plastically, as a frozen image or tableau, in effect as a painting:

[t]hus the scene in the music-room, with the two Galls, ceased very soon to signify for Watt a piano tuned, an obscure family and professional relation, an exchange of judgments more or less intelligible, and so on, if indeed it had ever signified such things, and became a mere example of light commenting bodies, and stillness motion, and silence sound.³⁴

It is Watt's increasingly simulacral grasp of the world, his relation to it as a continuous fabric where presentation is woven into representation and vice versa, that raises issues of simulation, mediation and the limits of consensual reality that seem to accord with Dali's hyper-pompier universe of optical illusion, sheer surface and interpretative delirium. The fact that Watt is described in the manuscript as having a 'great knowledge of

³³ Beckett (1998), p. 68.

³⁴ Beckett (1998), pp. 70–71.

painting, ancient and modern' suggests one source for his affliction. Beckett goes on to refer to his character's

many weary hours . . . spent walking up and down in private and public collections, and turning the pages of illustrated catalogues, and in putting in an appearance at exhibitions, and in [dropping] in on painters in their studios, and in turning the pages of works of critics of art, and in listening to the noise of the conversation of the lovers of art.³⁵

As the narrator puts it at one point in the novel as published: 'One wonders sometimes where Watt thought he was. In a culture-park.'³⁶ Such a comment is very suggestive when placed in the context of the image-saturated, commodified landscape into which the novel will be eventually released.

And yet despite such parallels with Dali's proto-postmodernism, Beckett's citation of the surrealist as exemplar in 1946 remains surprising. It is the excessive illusionism of Dali's work that is the stumbling block here. The lack of attention to the grain of the medium, and conversely the investment in the art surface as transparent window, jar profoundly with Beckett's patiently developed notion of juxtaposition as a material element to be pitched against mimesis. In addition, as argued in the Introduction, Watt's tendency to see the world in formal, 'plastic' terms thematizes abstract looking as a part of a highly materialist investigation of perception and cognition that has roots in literary modernist notions of the image. Where Dali relies on psychoanalysis and the unconscious to justify his vision, the conceptual framework behind Beckett's notion of abstraction is that of experimental psychology. In this opposition we can see Beckett's concern to stay close to the real of perception and sensation, rather than drifting off into the surrealist dreamscape.

What happens in the course of *Watt's* evolution is that Beckett's interest in materialism is registered not only thematically through notions of an abstract, 'plastic' looking that evacuates content, but also in the form of the novel itself. This occurs through passages of rigorously procedural technical writing, whose permutations draw attention to the surface of the text. The Kaun letter's call for the disruption of the art surface is thus still present in *Watt* in a way that challenges the purely simulacral. For *Watt* is a novel that moves constantly between, on the one hand,

³⁵ Watt notebook 3 90r–91r. Quoted in Nixon (2011a), p. 161.

³⁶ Beckett (1998), p. 73. The latter term refers perhaps to the German practice of concentrating museums and galleries in a single sector, such as the Museum-Islands in Berlin and Munich where Beckett spent so much time in 1936–1937.

metafictional games that, in their relation to realism, can be compared to Dali's surrealism, and on the other hand extremely rebarbative passages of repetition, cataloguing or permutation that can be related to another mode of avant-garde practice, one that appropriates various forms of 'non-literary' writing. It is the latter on which I want to concentrate now. The passages in question, while definitely factual, do not exhibit that judicious, often metonymic, use of the detail that is one of the hallmarks of literary realism. Rather, they are characterized by an approach to the real that is exhaustive, rehearsing a series of simple facts systematically yet indiscriminately. The consciousness implied, if one is implied at all, is procedural rather than selective, mechanical rather than intentional. It is in the contrast between such sections, and the novel's narrative and lyric moments, that *Watt* seems to put into practice what Beckett will admire in Moliere in the 1945 essay.

As every reader of *Watt* knows, the encounter with these passages can be trying, and as such they constitute an example of 'willed creative mismaking' in the work. Take the following for example:

these voices, sometimes they sang only, sometimes they cried only, and sometimes they stated only, and sometimes they murmured only, and sometimes they sang and cried, and sometimes they sang and stated, and sometimes they sang and murmured, and sometimes they cried and stated, and sometimes they cried and murmured, and sometimes they stated and murmured, and sometimes they sang and cried and stated.³⁷

And so on until all the available combinations are exhausted. Here we have one of the very first appearances of a motif that will become profoundly important for Beckett, that of a formal structure of repetition that brings language itself to the edge of abstraction.

The manic, obsessional pursuit of precision in the passage above marks a familiar desire to bring language's denotative powers as close as possible to particular description. A modernist interest in an absolute fidelity to the real is reflected in the appeal to the concretion of sense-impression, as Beckett attempts to describe exactly the range of aural experiences that Watt has (or, a significant caveat, believes he has). Yet the narrator does this not through the deployment of a sensuous intelligence in Eliot's sense, but through the kind of technical writing practised by Duchamp in *The Green Box* and James Watt in his description of the Kinneil Engine. It is a procedure that, like the fictional Watt's plastic looking, introduces

³⁷ Beckett (1998), p. 27.

precision but issues in confusion, as Beckett marks the limits of modernist desire for the representation of authentic experience. As the phrases pile up, the text seems to drift further and further from the real rather than move closer to it; indeed it comes to seem likely, here and elsewhere, that the principle impetus behind such passages is provided by the drive to enumerate all the possible combinations of their main terms, rather than to describe their object. It is as if the grammatical structures of the text itself have taken control.

Here then is Beckett's demonstration of the abusive attitude to language that he called for in the Kaun letter, for it is in passages such as this that he comes closest to what he describes in 1937 as a 'nominalist irony'. As with Duchamp's nominalism, the irony stems from the fact that the attempt to access the real by reducing the word to absolute particularity results instead in a radical opacity. In *Watt*, Beckett achieves such effects by drawing on ideas of the technical, the systematic and the machine-like akin to those found in Jennings' 'The Iron Horse'. In doing so, however, he produces a writing that goes far beyond Jennings' 'Reports'. The latter, as Miller points out, push 'towards the hermeneutic concerns of surrealism rather than the cool, derisive mechanization of Duchamp's "pseudo-machines"'.³⁸ In other words, Jennings remains within a conventionally literary agenda, producing texts that encourage the reader to acts of interpretation. By contrast, *Watt*, in its procedural passages, determinedly blocks and obfuscates hermeneutic interpretation. The sheer dumb factuality of the repeated phrases gives no purchase. Like a readymade, the smooth, material surface of *Watt*'s repetitive excursions insists there is nothing to be uncovered, that these statements are all there is. Such obstruction or obfuscation of interpretation exists in a fine tension with the novel's thematization of hermeneutic questions through the reality or otherwise of Watt's subjective experience of Knott's house. In this way, *Watt* mobilizes key notions of juxtaposition, reciprocal relation and cleavage through the contrast between, in Miller's terms, hermeneutics and derision ('scorn' in Beckett's term in the Kaun letter). In what follows I am going to concentrate on three short sections of ekphrastic writing that articulate these alternatives through the relation of a painting (or the image of a painting) and its beholder.

In a novel that is so radically unstable, centred on a protagonist who 'had not seen a symbol, nor executed an interpretation, since the age of fourteen', it is all the more remarkable that its clearest depiction of

³⁸ Miller (2002), p. 233.

an artwork and its beholder involves a seemingly successful reading.³⁹ Beckett's interest in the material surface of the work of art, whether text or painting, is also in evidence in this much-discussed section, when Watt enters Erskine's room and finds a geometrical composition depicting a broken circle and a point on the wall:

[t]he only other object of note in Erskine's room was a picture, hanging on the wall, from a nail [note here the reference back to the ravanastron]. A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground, of this picture. Was it receding? Watt had that impression. In the eastern background appeared a point or dot. The circumference was black. The point was blue, but blue! The rest was white.⁴⁰

Beckett's choice of this particular style of painting is surprising enough to warrant sustained consideration. Although very interested, as we have seen, in painters like Yeats, Feininger and Kirchner who subjected the human figure to schematization, whether through cubist fragmentation or expressionist distortion, purely non-figurative painting was not something for which he usually evinces much enthusiasm. The rigorous, hard-edged work of Malevich, Mondrian, the Bauhaus et al., which the *Watt* painting with its circle 'obviously described by a compass' seems to be referencing, is particularly conspicuous in its absence from his published and unpublished writing on art. There are exceptions to this of course – visiting Ida Bienart's collection, Beckett admired constructivist pieces by Lissitzky as well as three of Kandinsky's highly geometrical Bauhaus period works.⁴¹ Yet he reserved his highest praise for the latter's *Träumerische Improvisation*, an earlier, much more colourful and sensuous (though still non-figurative) picture by the Russian painter, describing it as less abstract than the others he had seen.⁴² As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), Beckett meant something very specific – and certainly not non-figurative – by the term abstract. Here he wants to make a distinction between the lyrical Kandinsky of the early period and the more recent aggressively stark, formalist work. It is clear his preference is for the former.

Beckett met and discussed Kandinsky with the latter's friend and foremost critical supporter Will Grohmann while he was in Germany. Although he would become an internationally known figure after the war, Grohmann's criticism is often biographical and journalistic, with a patina of philosophical references (Kant, Bergson, Husserl) and traces of his

³⁹ Beckett (1998), p. 70. ⁴⁰ Beckett (1998), p. 126.

⁴¹ For details of the paintings see Grohmann (1933). ⁴² GD., 7.2.37.

training in comparative religion. Given the prominence of the circle motif (albeit broken) in the painting Watt finds in Erskine's room, Grohmann's insistence on the importance of this device in his work on the painter is intriguing. His book *Wassily Kandinsky: Life and Work* cites a 1930 correspondence with the artist himself, where Kandinsky admits his 'fascination' with the circle, and agrees with the critic's suggestions that the shape has 'a link with the cosmic'. Kandinsky goes on to argue that the circle is:

- (1) the most modest form, but asserts itself unconditionally
- (2) a precise but inexhaustible variable
- (3) simultaneously stable and unstable
- (4) simultaneously loud and soft
- (5) a single tension that carries countless tensions within it. The circle is the synthesis of the greatest oppositions. It combines the concentric and the excentric in a single form, and in balance. Of the three primary forms it points most clearly to the fourth dimension.⁴³

This tallies with Kandinsky's contribution to the debate on abstraction in *Cahiers d'Art* in 1931, where he had argued that the circle is a pictorial means as legitimate as Adam's finger in Michelangelo's fresco.⁴⁴ Grohmann suggests in his book that the period between 1926 and 1929 is a distinct period in which the circle assumes a great importance for Kandinsky. Indeed the letter of 1930, where Kandinsky agrees with the critic's suggestions and expands at length is mentioned more than once, and seems important to Grohmann. Given this, it is surely likely that the relationship between Kandinsky and the circle would have come up in the conversations he had with Beckett in 1937.

The tenor of Grohmann's approach to Kandinsky's work is well captured by his comment on the 'magic' of *Heavy Circles*: '[t]he competition of the two large circles, the sudden overlappings, the contrast between rough and smooth, even the dotted surfaces . . . all combine to produce some heroic cosmic process which it is impossible to look at unmoved.'⁴⁵ Writing on *Composition VIII*, meanwhile, 'which Kandinsky regarded as the highpoint of his postwar achievement', Grohmann pays particular attention to Kandinsky's use of the circle to manipulate surface and depth through colour:

[c]olors are reduced to a minimum: the ground of the upper right is whitish, that of the lower left light blue; the only exception to primary

⁴³ Grohmann (1959), pp. 187–188.

⁴⁴ Grohmann (1959), p. 204.

⁴⁵ Grohmann (1959), p. 206.

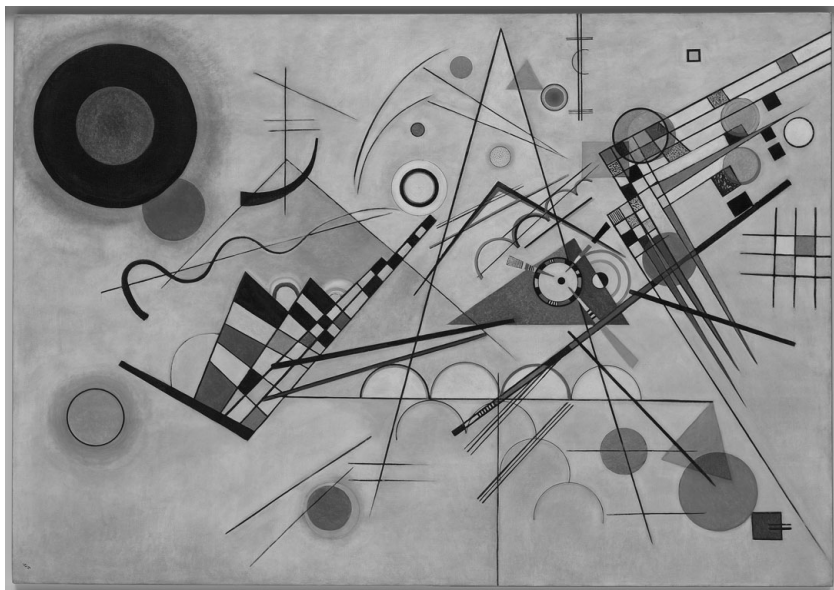


Figure 5.1 Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VIII*,
© The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

blues, reds and yellows is the violet inside the black circle at the upper left, which dominates the picture. The pink aura around the circle fixes its position in space. But does the black circle recede into or protrude from the picture plane? The vermilion red circle tangential to it makes it seem to protrude, while the violet circle at the centre makes it recede. The pink aura contributes to the ambiguity. The rest of the composition is flat, and it is impossible to say whether the variously colored smaller circles create depth, or are merely points of rest.⁴⁶

That Beckett is engaging with this kind of reading of an abstract painting is clear from Watt's perplexed enquiry of the circle:

[w]as it receding? Watt had that impression. In the eastern background appeared a point, or dot. The circumference was black. The point was blue, but blue! The rest was white. How the effect of perspective was obtained Watt did not know. But it was obtained. By what means the illusion of space, and it almost seemed in time, was given, Watt could not say. But it was given. Watt wondered how long it would be before the point and circle

⁴⁶ Grohmann (1959), 190.

entered together upon the same plane. Or had they not done so already, or almost? And was it not rather the circle that was in the background, and the point that was in the foreground?⁴⁷

Yet this scene is not solely critique or pastiche of Grohmann, rather the picture, and Watt's relation to it, demonstrates key tenets of Beckett's understanding of the character and function of painting. As we have seen, this is not a question of spiritual forces, what Grohmann calls the way 'the transcendent reveals itself in the phenomenal world', but instead, exemplified for Beckett by the painting of Jack B. Yeats, the simultaneous enactment and suspension of relation.⁴⁸ As we shall see shortly, the abstract painting in *Watt* carries out precisely such an enactment and such a suspension. Crucially, however, it is the manner in which the fictional painting subtly departs from Kandinsky's standard practice that brings it into line with Beckett's ideas. It is important, for example, that the circle in the painting is a broken one, rather than the bounded, perfect forms of a Kandinsky of the middle period. This interruption of the circle's pure *Gestalt* also marks the image as one of ruination, inscribing the incompleteness of materiality into the painting, rather than Grohmann's plenitude of the cosmic.

Beckett thus chooses the most austere contemporary form of abstraction as a model, in order to subtly undermine its metaphysical tendencies and in doing so draw it into line with his own position, which sees abstraction as a quality of the world, rather than transcendent to it in the way Grohmann understood it. Such a distinction between the ideal and the material is visible in some of Beckett's comments on other abstract painters aside from Kandinsky. In praising Lissitzky, for example, it is notable that Beckett interprets the painter's abstract shapes in the resolutely physical and substantial terms of architecture, calling them issemics and cornices.⁴⁹ On another occasion, speaking of Goethe's drawings and admiring the way they bring out forms of abstraction inherent to nature itself, he falls back on the notions of visual art's ability to retrieve the plastic structure of the real.⁵⁰ As is the case with his response to the 'atomization' of Cézanne's painting in the mid-1930s, here Beckett admires a style for its perceived ability to throw into relief abstract material structures immanent to the world. In this sense, abstraction reveals the basic, resistant ontology of the object-world. To put this another way, for Beckett abstraction is a necessary component of the real that the kind of painting he values reveals formally, and it is the recognition of this revelation that constitutes the

⁴⁷ Grohmann (1959), p. 127.

⁴⁸ Grohmann (1959), p. 207.

⁴⁹ GD., 7.2.37.

⁵⁰ GD., 25.1.37.

contract between beholder and image, as articulated most forcefully in the Yeats/Watteau letter. As Beckett's reading of Yeats, Watteau and Goethe suggests, however, the painting that reveals such abstraction need not itself be purely abstract. As we know, Beckett's tastes tend towards painting that combines figuration or realism with elements of abstract schematization. Indeed the description of the painting in Erskine's room may be Watt's distillation of the formal elements of such a representational image. This is suggested by an earlier draft, where the picture in Watt's room does not take the form of an abstract painting at all, but is instead a series of memories of representational images based on several that Beckett had seen in Germany:

But as he meditated on the wall, the narrow white-washed wall with its church calendar before which, seated, he meditated, there came, and stayed, and went, now faint, now clear, images of images, Kaspar David Friedrich's Men and Moon, a coloured engraving of ? [in the typescript this becomes 'Hercules Seghers'] in the Zwinger? An Elsheimer pen drawing hanging one Christmas on a screen, Watt could not remember on loan from where, in the Kaiser Friedrich; and that as to where they were now, they might be anywhere now, burnt, or in a xx [typescript has 'an attic'], or sent away.⁵¹

The three images mentioned here capture three of Beckett's recurrent interests in painting: the structure of juxtaposition between two figures (Friedrich), the materiality of landscape (Seghers) and the use of light and dark (Elsheimer). These characteristic concerns also define the abstract painting in Erskine's room: relation, materialism, colour contrast. As such, the presence of Friedrich, Seghers and Elsheimer in *Watt's* archival hinterland is another indication that the image in the final text articulates, in a condensed form, elements central to Beckett's abstract approach to all art. In the end the question of whether, in the diegetic space of the novel, Watt is looking at a realist painting and picturing its compositional elements, or encountering an abstract painting with links to Kandinsky and others is thus beside the point. Whether representational or abstract, this pure geometry of circle and centre suggests a structure of looking central to Beckett's approach to painting, one that understands abstraction in art as a parallel to abstraction in the world. It is as if the core of Yeats' juxtapositional painting – 'the way he puts down a man's head, and a woman's head, side by side' – is here distilled to its most economical and material representation.

⁵¹ *Watt* notebook 4, 2v–3r. Quoted in Nixon (2011a), p. 160.

Importantly, however, Beckett does not let it rest there, for in the face of what seems to be a piece of classically avant-garde abstraction, the novel's own experimental apparatus cranks laboriously into action:

he wondered what the artist had intended to represent (Watt knew nothing about painting), a circle and its centre in search of each other, or a circle and a centre in search of a centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and its centre in search of its centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and its centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively, or a circle and a centre not its centre in search of its centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and a centre not its centre in search of a centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and a centre not its centre in search of its centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and a centre not its centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively, in boundless space, in endless time.⁵²

While in one way this moment continues the novel's regular bouts of procedural writing through its resort to a mechanized automatism, the passage also mimics a repeated act of interpretation that attempts to divine the artist's intention. Indeed the process of a continuous testing of conjunction and separation between centre and circle resembles nothing so much as the Kantian free play of the faculties, the application, by the imagination, of concept after concept to the raw data of intuition. It is notable too that this process ends with the apprehension of 'boundless space' and 'endless time', the most important Kantian categories. Crucially, however, this is when emotion returns, as feeling is released in the beholder: 'and at the thought that it was perhaps this, a circle and a centre not its centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively, in boundless space, in endless time, then Watt's eyes filled with tears that he could not stem'.⁵³

The fact that what seems to be an appeal to the procedures of the Kantian aesthetic is couched in terms of an automatic, bluntly permutational structure is evidence again of Beckett's ambivalent relations with Kant. As I argued in the Introduction the Beckett of the 1940s is continually compelled to worry at the limits of Kantian aesthetics, his characteristic dualism attracting him to the philosopher's elegant antinomies and antitheses, while his pessimism and anti-humanism gleefully abuses them. In the moment under consideration here he pushes a formalist aesthetic to a parodic extreme, yet he pulls the passage back from a complete nihilism through the extraordinary pathos of Watt's final reaction.

⁵² Beckett (1998), p. 127.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Despite this, however, and typically for a novel that continually ironizes and undercuts aesthetic judgement, these ideas are subjected to yet another procedure in the text when Watt asks, having performed his act of judgement: '[w]as the picture a fixed and stable member of the edifice, like Mr Knott's bed, for example, or was it simply a matter of paradigm, here today and gone tomorrow, a term in a series?' The answer comes immediately: '[a] moment's reflexion satisfied Watt that the picture had not been long in the house, and that it would not remain long in the house, and that it was one of a series.'⁵⁴ Ackerley points out that the manuscript originally stipulated that the painting was a reproduction, and that Watt's description of it as a painting comes relatively late on in composition. As we have seen, the manuscript also identifies the image that excites Watt to analysis as a church calendar, which again implies a mass-produced (religious) picture at the site of origin. In the final text, serialism in general stands in for these traces of mass-production, expanded to encompass the general principle of reproducibility and repetition that saturates the whole text. In this way, notions of authenticity and autonomy often associated with abstraction are challenged, so that Watt's ecstatic experience of the work as situated in boundless space and endless time is brought uncomfortably close to the less exalted experience of the infinite reproducibility of the commodity form. Here again Duchamp's presence is making itself felt, and one is reminded of *Bicycle Wheel*, *Bottle Rack*, *Fountain* or another of the readymades where a mass-produced object is elevated 'to the dignity of a work of art'.⁵⁵ Works like these, as Alex Potts puts it, 'replay within an artworld context the industrialized processes of mechanical production and reproduction, as well as a rhetoric of flatness and expressive emptiness'.⁵⁶ The readymade thus strikes at the root of the ideas of the individual, irreplaceable object essential to traditional Kantian aesthetics. In the wake of such work, according to Thierry de Duve, all appeals to Kant can only be 'after Duchamp'.⁵⁷

Yet this cannot completely discount the power of the moment when Watt makes his interpretation of the painting. At the end of this passage of mechanical writing parodying Kantian aesthetic judgement, the text suddenly breaks free from a procedural, constrained practice and emerges in genuine emotion. In an instant that repeats Beckett's insight into his

⁵⁴ Beckett (1998), p. 129.

⁵⁵ 'Objet usuel promu à la dignité d'objet d'art', as defined in Breton and Eluard (1938), p. 23.

⁵⁶ Potts (2014), pp. 784–805. For an account of the aesthetics of the readymade see Evnine (2013), pp. 407–423.

⁵⁷ See de Duve (1996).

own condition in front of a painting by Yeats, the image reveals the earthly plight of monadic isolation and a materialism of the broken, the incomplete and the opaque. As Beckett put it to MacGreevy, the 'impassible immensity' between subject and object is materialized and dramatized and experienced emotionally by an absorbed viewer. Rather than a moment of fusion, there is instead an experience of disjunction, as Watt, one can surmise, has 'a petrified insight into his own singleness'.

The trope of the believer's eyes filling with tears as he or she contemplates the divine image is a very common one in accounts of devotional painting. Its appearance in Watt confirms the importance of religious art as an element in the evolution of Beckett's aesthetics, as argued in [Chapter 3](#).⁵⁸ It is instructive then to compare the scene in Erskine's room with the appearance, later in the novel, of a religious image by Hieronymus Bosch, to which the narrator compares Watt and then, in a memorable moment, himself. Bosch was one of the Surrealists' major inspirations, largely due to the strange oneiric terrain of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, but Beckett does not appeal to this aspect of the painter. *Christ Mocked* (*The Crowning with Thorns*) depicts a pale, mild, gentle Christ, naturalistically rendered, as yet untouched by the four figures menacing him, one of whom holds the crown of thorns above his head.

Yet it is striking that the narrator does not exploit the calm, remote, meditative aspect of Bosch's figure, features that, given Beckett's characteristic response to such qualities, he would certainly have noted and remembered. Indeed Beckett would have known that such a depiction of the Passion was unusual for the period in which *Christ Mocked* was painted, where it was much more common to concentrate on Christ's suffering.⁵⁹ All the more strange and significant, then, that it is the latter that the narrator emphasizes through the parallel with Watt, concentrating on the body and its pain, and on the vivid somatic connections that the beholder of such a violent scene makes between image, flesh and sensation:

[t]hen he turned, with the intention very likely of going back the way he had come, and I saw his face, and the rest of his front. His face was bloody, his hand also, and thorns were in his scalp. (His resemblance, at that moment, to the Christ believed by Bosch, then hanging in Trafalgar Square, was so striking, that I remarked it). And at the same instant suddenly I felt as though I were standing before a great mirror . . . so that I looked at my hands, and felt my face, and glossy skull, with an anxiety as real as unfounded.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ See Elkins (2004), pp. 124–135.

⁵⁹ See Belting (1990), pp. 143–148.

⁶⁰ Beckett (1998), p. 157.



Figure 5.2 Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Mocked (The Crowning with Thorns)*,
© The National Gallery, London

The painting that Beckett is describing here is actually Dirk Bouts' *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, which was hanging in the National Gallery at the time, and which Beckett would have known. In this image there are thorns in Christ's scalp, and his hands are bloody in a way that they are not in the Bosch. Indeed a marked characteristic of the Bosch painting is that the crown of thorns is poised above Christ's head, and has not yet made contact with it. The visual image that the narrator relies upon in order to communicate bodily with the reader is thus both immensely powerful and curiously compromised, and the reader's response is equally conflicted. Beckett takes the basic model of a devotional relationship of identification with the religious image and throws into doubt its continued efficacy. By contrast, Watt's reaction to the painting in Erskine's room, although edged around with qualifications through formal devices, is of a different order. There, abstraction functions dialectically, distancing the beholder from the painting, and enabling him to read it for an instant, even as it also

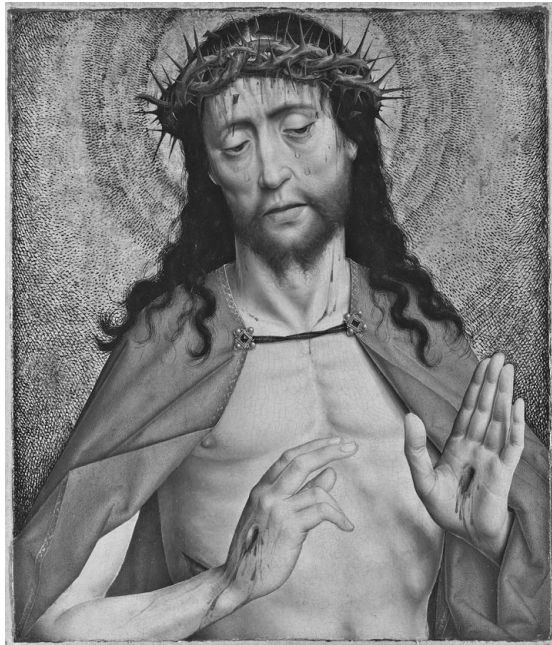


Figure 5.3 Dirk Bouts, *Christ Crowned with Thorns*,
© The National Gallery, London

invades the text, mechanizing the reader's relation to that very moment of insight. Where the relation of the narrator to Dirk Bouts' profoundly realist image is one of misrecognized identification, Watt's tears attest to Beckett's sense of the recognition of alienation as the core of a successful aesthetic judgement.

I want to turn now to the last major ekphrastic moment in the text, in order to examine from another direction Beckett's articulation of realism and abstraction in *Watt*. Manuscript notebooks 1 and 2 concern the Quin family, and include very precise details of their home, such as the Hicks sideboard and the four Cornelscourt imitation chairs. As Seán Kennedy points out, 'page after page of the manuscripts document the salt-sellers, finger-bowls, basins, fish-kettles, skimmers, skillets and sauceboats, as well as the various services, of glass, of pewter ware, of porcelain ware, of china ware, of choice earthenware, that crowd the kitchen'.⁶¹ The specificity

⁶¹ Kennedy (2015), pp. 222–236, p. 227. See Ackerley (2010), p. 234.

of these details, down to the names of the makers and styles, and the status of the chairs and sideboard as reproductions rather than genuine antiques (Hicks specialized in imitating antique furniture), suggests a concern to depict an exact social strata, that of a middle-class family with pretensions. The use of furniture to do this is a classic realist strategy, familiar from Balzac.

There are also two pictures in the main room, one above the fireplace, and the other above the sideboard. The first, a portrait of Mrs Quin, is by Matthew David McGilligan, or 'The Master of the Leopardstown Half-lengths'.⁶² Beckett's identification of the artist in these terms advertises once again his interest in Netherlandish painting: such appellations were routinely adopted in the case of painters from Northern Europe whose names had been lost. The half-length painting as a form of portraiture was also pioneered in the North. The second is the work of a certain Art Conn O'Connery, depicting a naked Mr Quin playing the piano. It will eventually end up in the Addenda to the novel as published.⁶³ Both McGilligan and O'Connery are fictional. Elsewhere in the manuscript, however, Beckett attributes the portrait of Mr Quin to Will Pickersgill, a society portrait painter in the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁴ There are numerous pictures by Pickersgill in the National Gallery in London, including portraits of Wordsworth, Hannah More, Jeremy Bentham and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. This reference to Pickersgill gives a sense of what is at stake in Beckett's parody of portraiture in *Watt*. It is in the nature of Victorian portraits to refer outside themselves to a specific individual, drawing authority from that relation, but also lending gravity to the person depicted through the accuracy of their realism. In this sense, portraiture, and especially the kind of portraiture associated with Pickersgill, should be understood as exemplary of the relationship between the realist form, ideology and the visual image to which Beckett was acutely sensitive.

The painting of Mr Quin, as it is described in both the manuscript notebooks and the finished novel, is very different indeed to a typical image found in the National Portrait Gallery. It is one of the oddest images in a very odd book. Yet the fact that Beckett originally placed the description so early in the novel, and retained it even after stripping away the early sections, suggests its significance. As mentioned earlier, Beckett attributes the painting to 'Mr. Art Con O'Connery, called Black Velvet O'Connery, a product of the great Chinnery-Slaterry tradition'.⁶⁵ This locates the painting, parodically of course, in an Irish lineage. George Chinnery was

⁶² Ackerley (2010), pp. 206, 235.

⁶³ Ackerley (2010), p. 213.

⁶⁴ Ackerley (2010), p. 206.

⁶⁵ Ackerley (2010), p. 234.

active in Ireland from 1796 to 1802, painting portraits of the local Ascendancy gentry. John Joseph Slattery, meanwhile, active in Ireland from 1850–1858, was also a portrait painter. Neither is particularly distinguished, and the notion that theirs is a tradition at all, never mind a great one, speaks to Beckett's sense of the pretensions of those members of the so-called Anglo-Irish Ascendancy who sat for them.⁶⁶ Both the art and the tradition are a con, as Beckett's pun reminds us. The relation between realism, portrait painting and ideology is thus skewered here with specific attention to an Irish context, making it clear that it is the implication of certain forms of realist image-making with social and political power that accounts for the importance accorded to the portrait of Quin in the novel.

Beckett's description of the painting stays within the purview of a kind of realism. Both the detail of Dutch art and the psychological intensity of the Baroque have clearly had an influence on Mr O'Connery's work:

[o]n muscles of brawny neck, arm, torso, abdomen, loin, thigh and calf, standing out like cords in stress of effort, Mr. O'Connery had lavished all the resources of Jesuit tactility. Beads of sweat, realized with a finish that would have done credit to Heem, were plentifully distributed over pectoral, subaxillary and hypogastrical surfaces'.⁶⁷

In the manuscripts it is specified that the Heem mentioned here is not Jan Davidz de Heem but his son.⁶⁸ Both were best known for their still lives, which were, like those of van Huysum and Weenix, celebrated for their smooth, highly mimetic surfaces. Heem thus stands in for accuracy in depiction of the external world, and the rest of the long description of this painting attests further to Mr O'Connery's passion for the real, '[t]he right nipple, from which sprang a long red solitary hair, was in a state of manifest tumescence, a charming touch', Beckett writes.⁶⁹ Not for the last time Beckett's realism shades into surrealism here, where the question of the notoriously difficult representation of hair, classic touchstone for the assessment of a figurative painter's accuracy, is the pretext for a profoundly demented image.⁷⁰ This emphasis on realist technique occurs again slightly later: 'Mr O'Connery's love of significant detail appeared further in treatment of toenails, of remarkable luxuriance and caked with what seemed to be dirt.'⁷¹ Beckett is here recalling a comment Jack B. Yeats made to

⁶⁶ For an influential examination of the construction of Ascendancy tradition see McCormack (1994).

⁶⁷ Beckett (1998), pp. 251–252. ⁶⁸ Ackerley (2010), p. 213. ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Dali's essay 'First Morphological Law Concerning the Hairs in Soft Structures' was published in 1936. See Finkelstein (1998), pp. 314–316.

⁷¹ Beckett (1998), p. 251.

him in the Dublin National Gallery *à propos* Gentileschi's *David Slaying Goliath*, '[f]irst nude I ever saw with dirt in his toenails.'⁷² This comment associates the Quin portrait with the second rate – Beckett told McGreevy that the Gentileschi was 'awful' – but also with Ireland.

Such an emphasis on realism at the level of content contrasts with the immense difficulties of visualization that the painting, as described in the Addenda, presents to the reader. Here we have the most concerted attempt in the novel to create an image that, while seeming to set out to record a stable visual impression, ends up producing a kind of interpretative delirium. To do this Beckett exploits the differences between the temporal, linear structure of the written text and the spatial quality of painting, to create almost insuperable problems for the reader's attempt to grasp the image. This can be seen in the way the description summons up a heroic, muscled body, with its burnished 'pectoral, subaxillary and hypogastrical surfaces', only then, as the passage continues, to completely subvert its own description. That is to say Beckett, after drawing the eye down the body in a first sweep, then inverts this process, stopping at the details of the long and dirty toenails and moving back up, enumerating almost exactly the same parts of the figure, but with a very different focus. Now the skin, contrary to the heroic description of straining muscles and perfectly painted beads of sweat, is covered in dirt and ordure: 'feet . . . could have done with a wash, legs not what you could call fresh and sweet, buttocks and belly cried out for a hipbath at least, chest in disgusting condition, neck positively filthy'.⁷³ It is as if the eye that is describing the figure, after scanning the length of the body, retraces its movement to discover in the process a completely different picture. This double-take, which could only be accomplished in a language-based account, is compounded by the return to the description of the head at the end. As the narrator attempts to finally describe the sensual presence of the face, the most important part of any portrait, there is a stumbling and a repetition that makes it difficult for us to see anything at all: '[m]oustache, pale red . . . tumbled over ripe red lips, and forth from out ripe red jaw, and forth in same way from out ripe red dewlap, sprouted, palely red, doomed beginnings of bushy pale red beard.'⁷⁴ At certain moments in this sentence we seem to be right on the verge of the mechanical or technical writing that periodically invades *Watt*.

The sheer strangeness and extremity of the Quin portrait suggests that, in both description and painting, realist techniques are once again being

⁷² Letter to MacGreevy, 27 June 1936, *LSBr*, pp. 345–348, p. 346.

⁷³ Beckett (1998), pp. 251–252. ⁷⁴ Beckett (1998), p. 252.

pressed into the service of other ends than the documentary. Thus, for example, while the ekphrastic description emphasizes the visual accuracy and sheen of a Dutch still life, it also refers to 'the resources of Jesuit tactility' used to paint the 'muscles of brawny neck, arms, torso, abdomen, loin, thigh and calf'.⁷⁵ There is an interesting contrast here between ideas of a flat, visually pleasurable surface (as in the paintings of Heem) and the suggestion of a highly sculptural and physical three-dimensional rendition of the body: look and touch are being brought together in an ambiguous way. More importantly, there is a generic dissonance between Dutch realism and another form of mimesis that can help us to begin to tease out the significance of Beckett's ekphrastic practice here.

The reference to the Jesuits strongly suggests a religious painting, and this is reinforced by the way the description encourages the visual imagination to glide down the body, from the neck muscles to the calf, seeing all 'standing out like cords in stress of effort', so that the image of a crucifixion is almost inevitably summoned up.⁷⁶ Beckett's otherwise oddly modest decision to cover the genitals also accords with the traditions of religious painting. Finally, the moment, towards the end of the description, where Beckett suggests a manuscript lacuna by inserting the words '(Latin quote)', may be inviting the reader to complete it with the words 'Jesus Nazarenus, rex Iudaeorum' or INRI. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), the German Diaries attest amply to Beckett's deep fascination with the image of the crucifixion. But we might also call here on the manuscript of the dramatic fragment *Human Wishes*, from 1940, which features Beckett's own highly detailed sketch of a crucifixion scene.⁷⁷ Drawn in landscape form across the middle of the page, it features a still living Jesus with the penitent and impenitent thieves on either side. There is also a kneeling Mary Magdalene, a standing Virgin, a centurion on horseback, the soldier with the sponge on his spear etc. The three central figures are given distinctive modern clothing: the smiling good thief wears an institutional uniform and looks up to heaven in a manner seen in many crucifixion images. Meanwhile his crazed, grotesquely staring counterpart is dressed like a 1930s bohemian and Christ himself wears plus fours and a cap, looking as if he has been arrested on the golf course rather than in Gethsemane. A soldier nearby wears a Pierrot costume, while John is identified through an initial on his briefcase.

Beckett has also thought in detail about the form and layout of his image: the foreground, middle ground and background are clearly delineated, with

⁷⁵ Beckett (1998), 251.

⁷⁶ [Ibid.](#)

⁷⁷ UoR BC MSS DRAMA/HUM MS 3459.

figures drawn in different sizes, in order to give a sense of a receding perspective. Together with this some foreshortening is used, and above the composition there are preparatory sketches. More than a doodle, then, this is an entire crucifixion scene, carefully constructed and obviously informed by other images that Beckett had committed to memory. What is more, it is a crucifixion scene of a certain kind: the lack of halos, sense of a bustling landscape populated with figures going about their everyday business, and the use of anachronism in dress suggests fourteenth-century Netherlandish painting, as it detaches itself from the International Gothic and achieves a revolutionary realism and narrativity.⁷⁸

Given this, for reasons that will become clear, it is worth noting the attention Beckett pays in all three crucifixions in his drawing to the way the figure's feet are affixed to the cross. In each case one foot is placed above the other, allowing both to be held in place with a single nail. This was in fact an issue for counter-reformation aesthetics. Theologians had noted that the Bible specified four nails, one for each hand and foot, and suggested Christ's feet should rest side by side, so that they could be nailed in place individually. By contrast, the earlier Netherlandish and Northern European tradition had one foot resting on top of the other, so that one nail could pierce through both. This is the position Beckett insists on in his crucifixion drawing, and also, much more subtly, in the painting of Quin: '[h]is right foot, assisted from above by its fellow, depresses with force the sustaining pedal.'⁷⁹ The picture of Quin is also a crucifixion, then. Or, more accurately, it carefully alludes to medieval Netherlandish versions of this image. But Beckett's stress on the muscularity of the body, the brawny neck and the cords of the muscles, together with the mention of the Jesuits, suggests that the Spanish Baroque is also present, in particular the counter-reformation crucifixions painted by Velazquez, Zubarán, de Ribera and Murillo.⁸⁰ Beckett had admired Velazquez' *Lady with Fan* in the Wallace Collection, and saw 'a soft Velazquez light' in his room in a letter of 1934.⁸¹ Such Spanish religious painting is very different from the medieval traditions of the Netherlands and Germany, where, as noted earlier, Christ's body is frail and vulnerable, his suffering imbued with an enormous pathos to encourage empathy in the beholder. Counter-reformation painters emphasized instead the grace, perfection and dignity

⁷⁸ See Nielsen Blum (1969). For the differences between Netherlandish and Italian depiction of space see Panofsky (1971).

⁷⁹ Beckett (1998), p. 251. ⁸⁰ See Viladesau (2014).

⁸¹ Letter to Morris Sinclair, c. July 1934, *LSB*, pp. 215–216, p. 215.

of Christ's body. Spanish painters in particular took this to extreme lengths of naturalism: their figures are highly sculptural and three-dimensional, and the often repeated goal of such art was to create an image so convincing that it could be taken as a living person. Hence Christ is usually represented as alive, his body tense so that the musculature is well defined, his head inclined to the right, as though looking towards whoever might be praying to him. All of these distinctive traits are suggested in the details of Beckett's description of Quin's naked body.

There is another aspect to the invocation of the Baroque, however, which again gives traction to the idea that the Irish context is important here. Beckett's reference to 'Jesuit tactility' calls attention once again to a realist art put in the service of ideology. The Jesuits were indeed implicated in the history of Baroque painting, as C. P. Curran had pointed out in an article in the Irish Jesuit journal *Studies* in September 1940. Beckett knew Curran, though he was of course in Paris at the start of the war. But MacGreevy also wrote for *Studies*, and the article gives a very useful flavour of what the term 'Jesuitical' might have meant to MacGreevy and others with whom Beckett routinely discussed painting. Curran asks, '[w]hat is this baroque or, if you like, Jesuit art?' He then immediately answers, '[w]e know the terms in which the English humanists, churchmen and nonconformists – let us say Symonds, Ruskin and Dickens agreed to define it . . . it was, in their view, the capitulation of the classic spirit to religiosity, of art to dogma . . . a vulgar or alternatively lying appeal to the senses: its expressive naturalism was a theatrical device to stimulate base emotion.'⁸² Curran's account allows us to grasp the full implications of the narrator's description of Slattery's painting in such terms. First of all it is clearly critical. By referring to the 'Jesuit tactility' of the painting, the narrator allies himself with a nineteenth-century humanist rationalism that sees the Jesuitical Baroque as popular, ideological, irrational and above all manipulative. It is a painting that appeals directly to the senses, as the narrator acknowledges through his emphasis on 'tactility', but one that does so in the pursuit not of modernist authenticity but in service of religious indoctrination. The ekphrasis in the Addenda to *Watt* is thus one that, at some level, suspects the painting it describes: its narrator understands the Baroque image as having designs on the viewer and implicitly criticizes such intent. Beckett's experiences of Nazi spectacle in Germany undoubtedly contributed to his sensitivity to such matters, as seen when, watching a charity concert by a brass band he is reminded of a del Mazo, the Spanish

⁸² Curran (1940), pp. 351–366.

Baroque portrait painter.⁸³ This aspect of the ekphrasis confirms the argument that the absurdly named 'Chinnery-Slattery tradition' is a parody of painting's role in the legitimization of authority. Such a reading is further borne out in the manuscript notebooks, where a passage details Matthew David MacGilligan's vocation as a priest and his sojourn in Rome. This was cut short, apparently, when he was converted to the artistic life, through an encounter with Giuseppe Maria Crespi's resolutely secular painting *The Flea-Hunt*, which depicts a maid absorbed in some seventeenth-century personal hygiene. Beckett's narrative of MacGilligan's life inverts the kind of interpellation Baroque painting was created to perform. In the wake of Reformation iconoclasm, highly theatrical images of the Passion were used to solicit and enthrall through direct appeal to the body. Such images were less concerned with fostering techniques of private devotion, and more with securing the faith of the masses. By contrast, Beckett here has a mildly erotic genre painting (which in its use of the dramatically lit semi-naked body draws on Baroque religious art) perform the opposite task, that of recruiting MacGilligan to the secular role of artist. In doing so he is nevertheless again dramatizing his sensitivity to the role of painting in the production and reproduction of social identity. The drama of MacGilligan's exposure to the image is a drama of interpellation, however ironized.

The portrait of Quin that Art Con O'Connery eventually paints repeats the combination of the theatrical Baroque and Dutch realism found in Crespi's picture (while adding other elements, as we have seen), and should be read as similarly interpellative in its aims. Beckett's explicit identification of MacGilligan's counter-reformation style also succinctly encodes questions around the religious and political affiliations of the inhabitants of the house that is the novel's main setting. Although the Big House genre that the book parodies is associated with the Protestant Ascendancy, there is much in the notebooks that suggest the Quin family, like MacGilligan, are themselves Catholic. Such contradictions are marginalized by the way Beckett edits down the manuscript, making it much less specific with respect to the details of Knott's household. Yet the portrait's oscillation between baroque, Jesuitical tactility and sober Dutch bourgeois realism is one of the main surviving traces of this aspect of the novel. The two antithetical styles, sensuality and the supernatural on the one hand, rationality and an empirical realism on the other, reflect something of the ambiguous terrain that critics have long associated with the novel form in Ireland, in

⁸³ GD., II.10.36.

the nineteenth century in particular. As Seamus Deane, Terry Eagleton, Joep Leerssen and many others have pointed out, the Irish realist novel is haunted by the fantastic, while ostensibly escapist fiction routinely portrays social and political reality with great virtuosity.⁸⁴ Paying particular attention to the Irish Gothic novel, Roy Foster puts such generic instability down to an Anglo-Irish 'sense of displacement, a loss of social and psychological integration, and an escapism motivated by the threat of a takeover by the Catholic middle classes'.⁸⁵ W. J. McCormack meanwhile has pointed out the key role that family portraits, statues and mirrors play in much of this fiction, particularly in relation to the maintenance of the identity of characters like Maud in Sheridan le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*. Intriguingly, McCormack also notes a wavering between allusions to Dutch art and the Spanish Baroque in Le Fanu.⁸⁶

This body of work on Irish nineteenth-century fiction is highly suggestive when assessing the references to religion and the image in the *Watt* manuscripts, especially when set against Beckett's own background as a member of the Protestant middle (rather than Ascendancy) class in a newly independent Catholic theocracy. And yet it is also worth noting, in this respect, that the list of English-language influences that Breton sketched out in the *This Quarter* surrealism issue included Swift, Berkeley, Maturin and Synge.⁸⁷ That is to say, if certain preoccupations in *Watt* and its archival hinterland reflect the ambivalent status of the real and realism in Irish writing, this is refracted through Beckett's immersion in a Parisian avant-garde that had a congruent interest in exposing the limits of mimesis. To put this another way, if Beckett's praise of Dali's deliberate confections of the pompier, the non-pompier and the hyper-pompier can be placed in the context of an Irish tradition of meditation on ideology and the image, so it must be recognized that in *Watt* this same tradition is shredded almost to unrecognizability through Beckett's rigorous editing and an austere Duchampian mechanization of the word. In this sense, the portrait in Erskine's room glowers in the Addenda like an image in the

⁸⁴ Deane (1986); Eagleton (1995); Leerssen (1996); Lloyd (1993), pp. 138–141, is an extraordinarily rich and perceptive account of the problem. See also Cleary (2007), and in particular his comments on the formation of the Irish novel *vis-à-vis* British and French realism, pp. 48–75.

⁸⁵ Foster (1995), p. 220. But see also McCormack (1991), pp. 831–949.

⁸⁶ McCormack (1993), pp. 109–115. The most obvious example of le Fanu's debt to Dutch genre painting is 'The Strange Story of Schalken the Painter', which McCormack associates with Balzac's 'Le Chef d'Oeuvre Inconnu' and analyses in ways that are highly suggestive for a reading of Beckett's ekphrases in *Watt*. See 'Godfried Schalcken in History and Fiction' in McCormack (1993), pp. 121–137.

⁸⁷ Breton (1932), pp. 7–44, pp. 9–10.

attic of a Gothic novel, its abstract and generic antinomies reflecting the truth of the rest of the book, but its actual content so deformed as to be all but meaningless.

Watt's three ekphrastic passages each present an impossible image by drawing on aspects of Beckett's engagement with the history of painting. In each case, the resources of writing are used to render the visual image at the heart of the relevant passage profoundly unstable. Thus in the narrator's vision of Watt as Christ, a highly specific reference to a painting evokes two antithetical medieval images in the reader's mind, one highly emotional, the other famously remote and withdrawn, rendering the moment of identification described rather more ambiguous than initially it seems. In the fragment in the Addenda, elements of realism, surrealism and the Baroque are mobilized to parody and undermine bourgeois portraiture. Finally, in the description of the painting in Erskine's room we seem to encounter a description of a non-ideological image, one that accords with Beckett's vision of a materialist painting that reveals the ontology of profound disconnection to which Beckett subscribes. Paradoxically, this revelation excites a moment of successful empathy and identification. *Watt* thus marks a major step forward in Beckett's use of ekphrasis as a strategy in his writing. It is here that the tension between figuration and formalism that Beckett had been thinking through so intensively issues in an *agon* between literature and the image, realism and abstraction that will be a major preoccupation across the rest of his career.

From Bram van Velde to The Unnamable

Beckett's concern with the subject–object relation, and with painting as a paradigm through which this relationship might be explored, finds its best-known exposition in *Three Dialogues*, a series of exchanges with the art critic and writer Georges Duthuit published in the post-war *Transition*, that journal having been revived in 1948 under the latter's editorship. Beckett also helped with the English translation of Duthuit's book *Les Fauves* and, through his friend's good auspices, contributed a number of other essays, articles and reviews to art magazines and gallery publications, both French and international.¹

Largely through this association with Duthuit, but also as a result of financial necessity, in the immediate post-war period Beckett was thrown into the Parisian art world in a way that differed from his relationship with it prior to 1945. To some extent this was due to personal circumstances: a commitment to France sealed by war experiences, a French partner and a recognition that the French language will be the vehicle for his own work in future. But there were, in addition, important cultural and historical shifts that had an impact. The war and the Occupation of Paris had lent a new complexion to the tendency, already visible in the decades before the war, for French painting to look inwards, drawing on painterly traditions understood as specifically national and on intellectual movements, such as *Personnalisme*, that were seen as native to the country. As we shall find in this chapter, one strand of wartime painting in particular drew on these ideas as a powerful resource for resistance. If, as argued in [Chapter 2](#), the years before the war saw L'École de Paris overtaken by L'École de France, in the immediate post-war moment a new School of Paris emerged,

¹ For Beckett's many translations in *Transition* see Pilling and Lawlor (2011), pp. 83–95. As Pilling and Lawlor point out, he also translated articles by Duthuit for *ARTnews* (on Vuillard) and *The Listener* (on Gauguin) among other journals and magazines in the late 1940s and early 1950s. See p. 91.

defined by its experience of Occupation and its commitment to what several important critics saw as a peculiarly French form of abstraction. This chapter will argue that Beckett's attitudes toward this development, and the art-historical and philosophical ideas associated with it, are central to the evolution of his thinking in the immediate post-war period.

The war dislodged Paris from its position as the world capital of the avant-garde and bestowed that status upon New York. One of the catalysts for this shift across the Atlantic was the influx of French writers and intellectuals into the city. Duthuit himself had spent most of the war years in New York, as had Marcel Duchamp, André Breton and many other important figures. Most of the Irish, British, American, German and other expatriate writers, artists and intellectuals with which Beckett had mixed in the late 1930s – Peggy Guggenheim, Nancy Cunard et al. – had also moved on. Others, like the painter Otto Freundlich, had disappeared East on the transports.² Two figures still very much present, however, were the Dutch brothers Geer and Bram van Velde. It may be that a sense of a continuity with the 1930s accounts for something of the immense importance that Beckett attaches to their art in the 1940s and 1950s. The Van Veldes were, like Beckett, outsiders in post-War Paris. Like him they were deeply imbued with French culture, but also bore with them a legacy of the modernist cosmopolitanism that the war had done so much to compromise. Beckett's construction of an aesthetic affinity between himself and Bram van Velde in particular will allow him to distance himself from the inward, nationalistic turn of contemporary French intellectual and cultural life.

Tensions between the unique demands of the post-War French cultural context and Beckett's own, still evolving ideas are visible in his relations with Duthuit. The latter was a committed Bergsonian and thus more in tune with certain currents in contemporary French painting and art criticism than was Beckett. This accounts for some of the curious mixture of alliance and disagreement we find in *Three Dialogues*. While it is a text that has attracted an enormous amount of critical attention as a major statement of Beckett's aesthetics, it should be viewed in the light of positions that Beckett had already established in two earlier essays on the painting of the van Veldes, one in 1946 and one in 1947. When seen in this context, the aesthetic positions set out in the essay, their relationship

² Beckett had admired Freundlich's work in the late 30s, and the poem 'Ascension' appears to be named after one of his sculptures. He was deported to Lublin-Majdanek in 1942. See Dorléac (2008), p. 398.

with the French intellectual and political context, and their significance for Beckett's own work emerge with a greater degree of clarity.

Beckett's first and most important consideration of his two friends' work, indeed his most significant essay on painting, is 'La Peinture des van Velde, ou le Monde et le Pantalon', published in *Cahiers d'Art* 20–21 (1945–1946). The appearance of Beckett's essay coincided with the opening of two separate exhibitions by his subjects: Bram van Velde's show in Galerie Mai and Geer van Velde's in Galerie Maeght. What is immediately noticeable is the writer's uncompromising dissidence. Indeed there are moments where Beckett makes proclamations that would not have been out of place thirty years earlier, during the heyday of the avant-garde: '[s]oon it might be forbidden him to exhibit, indeed, to work, if he can't prove so many years in the academy. Identical howlings greeted free verse and the tonal system.'³ The mention of an all-powerful, violently conservative academy here feels anachronistic, a reference to battles for the freedom to experiment long fought and won. Yet in the context of post-war Paris it was impossible to take such victories for granted. In the Salon d'Automne of 1944 (known as the Salon de la Libération) Picasso had been granted a room of his own, and in a well-known review Georges Limbour described the works in terms of 'terror' and 'oppression', so close were they to the experience of war and occupation.⁴ But the public reaction to Picasso's wartime work was less thoughtful: paintings were torn from the walls and a police guard had to be raised. Although the identity of the demonstrators is unknown, Gertje Utley has argued that the privileging of a painter of Spanish origins may have been offensive to some French nationalists in the contemporary climate.⁵ As we shall see, Beckett's comments on academism relate, in all likelihood, to the work in another room in the Salon. But the Picasso incident no doubt contributed to the strong sense of embattlement that the essay conveys.

There is a defensive tone to 'Le Monde et le Pantalon' then, a sense that highly reactionary forces are assembling. This is particularly true of the long first section that deals almost exclusively with issues of the art institution, the public and the critical reception of challenging work. A profound scepticism about the whole idea of the art museum is especially evident. In the following passage, for example, Beckett draws on his own experiences of art galleries, institutions and audiences in Dresden, London, Dublin and elsewhere:

³ Beckett (1983), p. 121. My translation throughout.

⁴ Limbour (1981) pp. 222–224.

⁵ Utley (2000), pp. 50–51.

[t]hey'll put a leg of mutton in the place of its buttocks, as they did to Giorgione's *Venus* in Dresden. It will get to know cellars and ceilings. They'll attack it with umbrellas and spit, as they did to Lurçat in Dublin. If it is a fresco five meters high by twenty-five meters long, they'll lock it in a tomato hothouse, having taken care beforehand to vivify the colours with nitric acid, as they did to Mantegna's *Triumph of Caesar* in Hampton Court. Whenever the Germans don't have the time to move it, it will transform itself into a mushroom in an abandoned garage. If it is a *Judith Leyster* it will be attributed to Hals. If it is a *Giorgione* and too early to be attributed to Titian, it might be attributed to Dosso Dossi (Hanover). Mr. Berenson will discourse about it. It will have lived and spread joy.⁶

This moment in the essay marks Beckett's break with the discourse of the connoisseur, a mode of writing and thinking about art with which, until fairly recently, he had had deep affinities. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), the connoisseur's practices of dating and attribution, as practised by, for example, Bode and Friedländer, were integral to the rise and consolidation of the museum as the premier site for the display of painting. With the above remarks Beckett is attacking this class of art professionals, but as the essay continues it becomes clear that he has a much larger target: the whole set of relations between art history, the arbiters of aesthetic value and the art institution. Just before the lengthy passage quoted here, he creates a startling, complex image. Imagining a contemporary canvas that has just been completed, Beckett says it 'waits for eyes, eyes that, over the centuries . . . will blacken it with the only life that matters. This will kill it.'⁷ Here the process of interpretation is seen as the equivalent to the damage done by mishandled preservation of the type he then goes on to describe. In comparing the accretion of layers of interpretation with the darkening of varnish in this way, Beckett signals the connections he sees between interpretation, aesthetic judgement 'over the centuries' and institutionalization. Just as the obscuration or deterioration of a painting through the passage of time means that it cannot really be seen, so the kind of interpretation necessary to assess a work's value renders it invisible. It is here that the first section of the essay anticipates his treatment of the Van Veldes later, for Beckett admires above all a painting that problematizes such blackening, turning the tables on the eye by perplexing it. There is also a clear connection with the poetics of indeterminacy that Beckett has been evolving.

⁶ Beckett (1983), p. 119.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Beckett includes a list of 'significant' art critics in the essay, most of them personally known to him, though his analysis of their work is less than positive: '[t]he best, that of a Fromentin, a Grohmann, a MacGreevy, and a Sauerlandt, it is Amiel. Hysterectomies with a trowel,' he writes.⁸ Instead Beckett has recourse to a more general figure, the 'enlightened amateur', a kind of well-meaning man of taste, who keeps up with the latest openings and writes the occasional review. Beckett describes the latter with evident intimacy: 'their faces hollowed by unwarranted enthusiasm, their feet flattened by innumerable stations, their fingers worn by fifty Franc catalogues, who look first from afar, then from close-up, and in extreme cases, who probe the relief of the impasto with their thumbs'. And again, shortly after this, we read of 'the inoffensive lunatic who runs, as others run to the cinema, to galleries, to the museum and even into churches in the hopes – steady on – of pleasure'.⁹ It is not hard to see this as a self-portrait of his pre-war self, another version of the description of Watt's enthusiasms mentioned in [Chapter 5](#), although the connoisseur of the German diaries, clearly engaged in a project of self-education of some description, could certainly not be accused of simply devoting himself to pleasure. Beckett seems to register this distinction as he continues:

[h]e doesn't want to educate himself, the pig, nor improve himself. He thinks only of pleasure.

It is he who justifies the existence of painting as a public thing.

It is to him I dedicate the following remarks, artfully constructed so as to confuse him.

He only asks for enjoyment.

The impossible was made to keep him from it.

The impossible was especially made so that entire areas of modern painting would be taboo to him.

The impossible was made so that he might choose, so that he might take sides, so that he might accept a priori, so that he might reject a priori, so that he might cease to look, so that he might cease to exist, before something that he could have simply liked, or found ugly, without knowing why.¹⁰

⁸ Here there may be a trace of Thibaudet (1929). Thibaudet calls Baudelaire, Fromentin and Amiel writers of interiority ('Nous avons ici devant nous trois types d'écrivains intérieurs: d'où le titre de ce volume') and opposes them to the previous generation of Delacroix, Hugo, Balzac as writers of the world. The question of interiority and its role in painting and art criticism is central to Beckett's treatment of the Van Veldes, as we shall see.

⁹ Beckett (1983), p. 118. ¹⁰ Beckett (1983), p. 120.

This passage makes it clear that Beckett's concern in the essay is still the question of the function of painting and art in general in the public sphere. Crucially too, it is at this juncture that Beckett begins to ventriloquize an unnamed voice in short paragraphs of direct speech, each one preceded by the phrase '[h]e [i.e. the enlightened amateur] is told'. Exactly who is doing this 'telling' is not made immediately clear. We will be returning to this question in due course. For the moment it is enough to note that, in the final two phrases, Beckett is advocating a form of unmediated and subjective aesthetic judgement, to 'like' or 'find ugly', one that is not overburdened with 'impossible' demands. As we shall see these demands are those of a newly institutionalized art criticism.

According to Beckett the only way for both painter and art lover to avoid the kind of aesthetic appraisal demanded by institutions is through a purely personal judgement. This suggestion is glossed with a reference to Balzac's story of the painter Frenhofer, the classic account of artistic withdrawal and private creation versus display and collective judgement that was talismanic for so many modern painters:

[t]his is the reason Balzac's Unknown Masterpiece is by so many bed-sides. The work that escapes from human judgment finishes by expiring in appalling torment. The work considered as pure creation, whose function stops with its genesis, is doomed to nothingness.¹¹

In Balzac's story, Frenhofer's painting never leaves the studio in the Rue des Grands-Augustins, never makes it into the public world, nor is it judged by anyone else but the artist himself until, after ten years of work, he reveals it to Poussin and Porbus, who famously see only 'confused masses of colour and a multitude of fantastical lines'.¹² That very night the studio is consumed by fire. Beckett sees the tale as a parable of an avant-garde 'pure creation'. That such work must for Beckett entail a formalist aspect is apparent earlier in the essay when, in a passage part of which I have already quoted, Beckett anticipates the reference to Frenhofer: '[c]ompleted, brand new, the painting waits, a non-sense. For it is still nothing more than a painting, it still lives only a life of line and colour, has offered itself only to its author. Consider its situation. It waits to be released.'¹³

It is a small step from here to the ideas of sensory immediacy and the reduction of perception to a point anterior to cognition, that we have been following through previous chapters. Thus the way Beckett refers to a

¹¹ Beckett (1983), pp. 119–120. For the story's reception by Cézanne, Picasso and others see Ashton (1991).

¹² Balzac (1901), pp. 1–52, p. 29. ¹³ Beckett (1983), p. 119.

'non-sense' suggests an apprehension of the image without conceptual determination. And yet, in conformity with Beckett's persistent suspicions concerning a modernist poetics of pure perception, 'Le Monde' also sees the fall into history and value as inevitable. The notion of the painting as a 'non-sense', while attractive, cannot be maintained in any meaningful sense. As Beckett continues, '[c]onsider its situation. *It waits to be released*', before describing the blackening of the canvas by interpretation and the indignities that it will be subjected to by curators and connoisseurs.

Beckett's notion of the petrified, monadic subject appears in a fascinating new light in these moments, with the hermetic, 'windowless' sense of the self now being staged as the figure of Frenhofer alone with his painting. Later in the essay he explicitly identifies Bram van Velde with Frenhofer when he writes, '[h]is paintings have never left the studio, unless we count the annual airing, upside-down, at the Independents. From this long imprisonment they emerge today as fresh as though they had never ceased, since their debuts, to be admired, tolerated, and reviled.'¹⁴ This notion of a fundamentally private, 'imprisoned' image that, as Beckett puts it, is 'offered only to the author', one that is not subjected to a potentially universalizing aesthetic judgement, and which thereby retains the immediacy of 'pure creation', is another iteration of a suite of familiar ideas of concretion, particularity and authentic perception. Yet here such ideas are compromised by the clear suggestion that the artwork *must* become public in order to be properly 'released'. Beckett's consistent attempt over the previous decade to access an elusive moment right at the edge of perception, the moment before sensation is cognized, is seen as dependent upon monadic isolation. Only the absolutely isolated self is capable of producing images that, because they are not subjected to interpretation by others, are as Beckett puts it, 'fresh'. Yet this freshness still needs the supplement of 'eyes that will blacken it'. The alternative to this, as dramatized in *Le chef d'oeuvre inconnu*, is the 'torment' (*supplice*) of Frenhofer. The fundamental question then is how to transfer the monadic image across the border from the private to the public without the loss of its 'non-sense'. This is something which will preoccupy Beckett for the rest of his life.

It is important to emphasize once more that Beckett's thinking in this essay is a means of circumventing the pressures stemming from art's perceived public and political role in post-War Paris. Of all Beckett's critical texts, 'Le Monde et le Pantalon' is the one that most overtly recognises such political and social demands, making it clear that his monadic vision

¹⁴ Beckett (1983), p. 123.

of a 'petrified singleness' is also an engagement with a whole panoply of contemporary demands that art be 'a public thing'. But it was not his first consideration of the question. The relationship between painting and its public had of course been contentious in Paris during the war. Although the German authorities were highly sensitive to what was being published and exhibited in the capital, Laurence Bertrand Dorléac and others have pointed out that galleries like l'Esquisse, Galerie Jeanne-Bucher, Galerie de Berri, Galerie Jeanne Castel, Galerie de l'Abbaye and Galerie René Drouin continued to show work by 'difficult artists', sometimes clandestinely.¹⁵ Older and more prestigious spaces like Louis Carré, while less associated with what Dorléac calls the 'shadows', were also still showing challenging work. It was here that in April 1942 Beckett saw an exhibition by Georges Rouault that is recorded in the *Watt* manuscript (and dated there 5-5-42). Beckett uses the occasion, in the charged circumstances of the time, to meditate on aesthetic judgement and the personal versus the public. After acknowledging Rouault's pictures, describing them as 'small, few, well-presented', Beckett writes, 'Smith saw them at the same time. And now Smith knows, & Smith's friends know, why it is they are good, or why it is they might be improved.'¹⁶

The character of Smith also appears in the 1945 essay when, listing the alternatives to connoisseurship, Beckett mentions first general aesthetics, second anecdotes and third 'catalogue raisonnés, like Smith'. This identifies the Smith of the *Watt* fragment as John Smith, compiler of the multi-volume *Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*, published between 1837 and 1842, often seen as the first catalogue raisonné and a landmark in the establishment of the nineteenth-century market in European art.¹⁷ The nine volumes of the Smith catalogue recorded the major paintings of forty-one artists, described what each one represented, its provenance and value. In the process Smith codified and stabilized the enormous and inchoate field of Dutch genre painting and contributed not a little to its rise in prestige. Smith's catalogue is exactly the kind of factual, exhaustive document to which Beckett was attracted. Hence it is all the more striking that he distances himself from Smith and his methods. By imagining Smith appraising Rouault's paintings and communicating his conclusions to his friends, Beckett again suggests the essential role that communicable aesthetic judgement plays

¹⁵ Dorléac (2008), p. 300. ¹⁶ Quoted in Bolin (2013), p. 76.

¹⁷ For Smith see Armstrong-Totten (2014), pp. 87-100. For arguments against Smith's catalogue being the first of its kind see Friedenthal (2013), pp. 13-16.

in canon-formation. It is against the aesthetics of both Smith and the connoisseurs, compromised by their respective affiliation with the market and the museum, that Beckett pitches an aesthetics predicated on a purely personal and incommunicable judgement. Hence, immediately after the reference to Smith and Smith's friends Beckett continues,

[s]hut in one samples a new act set free. Set loose. Simply!
Two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two - a new concern.
Smith judges.
I am judged.
Smith at rest.
I am in torment.¹⁸

The concern with judgement, the sense of the advantages of hermeticism and the mention of 'torment' all mark this first appearance of Smith as a clear anticipation of the positions taken in the 1945 essay. The 'new act' that Beckett opposes to Smith's confident communication of his judgement on Rouault's work is the beholder's monadic response to an internally registered image, one that is not and cannot be communicated. It is a response, in other words, that is arrested at the subjective stage, remaining 'shut in', just as Frenhofer's picture remains in his studio. In the *Watt* note, Beckett's emphasis is on the beholder rather than the painter, but the fundamental stance is the same one that he will take in 'Le Monde et le Pantalon'. The private act of interpretation in Louis Carré is thus 'a new act' in the same way that, in the essay, the 'brand new' painted image that has 'offered itself only to its author' is associated with the indetermination of pure creation, 'a life of line and colour'. In both cases the emphasis is on novelty, potential and the unprecedented. Another important similarity lies in the way this open quality is also experienced as a kind of suffering. Thus, although in the *Watt* manuscript the suspension of a fixed meaning seems to produce the interpretative freedom and polysemy that Beckett values ('Two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two'), it also results in the beholder's 'torment', just as in the essay 'the work spared from human judgment finishes by expiring in terrible torments'.¹⁹

Having said this, the *Watt* passage includes details that are not present in the later essay, yet inflect our understanding of Beckett's position in suggestive ways. Thus he contrasts Smith's judgement *of* the image with his own judgement *by* the image: 'Smith judges. I am judged. Smith at rest. I am in torment.' Rouault was a profoundly religious painter, and the

¹⁸ Quoted in Bolin (2013), p. 76.

¹⁹ Beckett (1983), p. 119.

exhibition at Galerie Louis Carré contained, amongst other pictures, the paintings *Crucifixion*, *Christ and the Fishermen* and *Christ and the Disciples*.²⁰ Indeed Rouault's art draws deeply on exactly the traditions of devotional art that Beckett places at the centre of *Watt*'s ekphrastics, and by which he had been so affected in Germany. It is no great surprise, then, that traces of Beckett's understanding of 'art as prayer' are again surfacing here: one is reminded of the suffering of Dives before the remote face of the deity. Beckett's sense that the 'fresh' image, its 'non-sense' as a moment of 'pure creation', is balanced by 'torment', anxiety and abjection before the abstract and the inscrutable repeats exactly the complex of ideas and affects that had governed his thinking about art since the late 1930s.

The significance of 'Le Monde et le Pantalon' is twofold: first it places Beckett's aesthetic thought in the context of questions of the public role of art that, while certainly present in the German diaries and the *Watt* manuscript are for the most part implicit. These latter are also private documents. The *Cahiers d'Art* essay, by contrast, written for one of the most prestigious publications of its moment, is from the outset an intervention in debates on the function of art and its institutions in the public sphere. Second, the essay converts the notions of failure, autonomy, abstraction and the subject-object relation that have been preoccupying Beckett for the previous decade, into a manifesto-like programme for an alternative notion of aesthetics to prevailing models. In doing so Beckett takes the combination of Kant and Leibniz that threads its way through the diaries, letters and published and unpublished work of the previous decade and transforms it into a usable formula. The following statement is crucial in this respect:

[h]e [Beckett is still referring here to the *amateur*] is never told: 'There is no painting. There are only paintings. Because they are not sausages, they are neither good nor bad. All that can be said is that they translate, with more or less loss, absurd and mysterious pressures towards the image, that they are more or less adequate in relation to obscure internal tensions. As for the degree of that adequation, that is not a question for you, since you're not the one in the tautened skin. Even he knows nothing about it most of the time. Besides, it's a coefficient without interest. For losses and profits count equally in the economy of art, where the silenced is the light of the said and all presence absence.'²¹

Even as Beckett rejects aesthetic judgement here, he has recourse to ideas of self-sufficiency and autonomy that he had previously associated with

²⁰ See Dorival (1942).

²¹ Beckett (1983), p. 123.

Kantian disinterested contemplation.²² Yet, as elsewhere, such autonomy does not conduce to the transcendental qualities that underpin Kantian universality. It is the lack of a shared investment in the object, the inscrutability of artwork to the beholder, that is seen as primordial. Indeed the painter him or herself is ignorant of their own intentions to an equal degree. In this sense, the artwork itself becomes a monad and, as in the late 1930s, it is this very 'petrified singleness' that the beholder, and potentially all beholders, can recognize in it. Beckett's characteristic insistence that 'there is no painting, only paintings' also reiterates his stress on the particular as against conceptual categories. Once again the effect is to inhibit any Kantian sense of the artwork's formal properties activating an experience of a positively inflected universality. Instead, echoing the Yeats/Watteau letters, the emphasis falls on the artwork's capacity to rupture and suspend meaning, to gloss the 'said' with 'silence', 'presence' with 'absence', rather than its ability to propose transcendental bonds.

Bearing all of this in mind, we can now turn in more detail to French cultural politics in 1945, and the manner in which this context makes itself felt in Beckett's thinking. As mentioned earlier, 'Le Monde et le Pantalon' contains a series of statements by an unidentified voice that attempts to dissuade the amateur from any interest in the history of the avant-garde since Courbet: '[h]e is told: "Do not waste your time with the realists, with the surrealists, with the cubists, with the fauvists [the wild ones], with the tamed [les apprivoisés], with the impressionists, with the expressionists, etc., etc."' ²³ Who is this voice that intervenes to guide the amateur? One answer can be deduced from its final statement: '[e]verything that is good in painting, everything that is viable, everything that you can admire without fear, is located on a line that leads from the caves of the Eyzies to the Galerie de France.' ²⁴ Here we begin to get a definite sense not only of the identity of the mysterious voice, but also of the essay's real target. The Eyzies caves are a prehistoric complex in the Dordogne containing magnificent paintings of animals, the most famous site being Lascaux, which had been discovered in 1941 and was very soon after being pressed into service to underpin a narrative of French cultural identity, most famously by André Malraux. ²⁵ Beckett goes on, '[i]t is not clear whether

²² Recall the letter to MacGreevy of 8 Sept. 1935, and its image of the poem as 'absolutely disinterested . . . or useful in the depths where demand and supply coincide, and the prayer is the god', *LSBr*, p. 274.

²³ Beckett (1983), p. 121. ²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ On Malraux and the caves see Douglas Smith 'Beyond the Cave: Lascaux and the Prehistoric in Post-War French Culture', *French Studies*, (2004), Vol. LVIII, n. 2., pp. 219–232. Smith points out the use of Lascaux as an element in the institutionalization of French modernism, citing the

this is a pre-established line, or if it is a track that unrolls progressively, like the slime of a slug. He isn't shown by what marks he can tell whether a given painting fits in. It is an invisible line.' This mysterious, invisible line that leads, absurdly, from Lascaux to the present must be the line of French painting as asserted by contemporary critics such as Gaston Diehl, Jean Cassou, Pierre Frascatel and above all Bertrand Dorival, whose three-volume *Les Étapes de la Peinture Française Contemporaine*, dealing with painting between 1911 and 1944, appeared between 1943 and 1946.²⁶

Dorival's book argues that a certain strand of wartime painting in Paris – what he calls 'la vague de 1940' of Bazaine, Gischia, Lapicque, Singer, Desnoyer and Pignon – is the 'logical development' of the 'evolution of French art'.²⁷ More than this it makes very strident claims for a distinctively national form of modernism, arguing that the French gave to the 'international movement' in painting 'a specifically French version, defined by certain characteristics that belong exclusively to the French soul and to French art'.²⁸ Chief amongst the traits which distinguish French modernist painting is the notion of the plastic. As Dorival puts it, '[i]t is the plastic concern, bequeathed to our painting from our past, the urge to be plastic first and foremost, which gives to our painting its unquestionable majesty'.²⁹ Dorival attempts to displace the cosmopolitan painters of the École de Paris in favour of this home-grown art. And again the 'plastic' is key, being the:

reason for the superiority of its [i.e. French art's] products to those of foreign or semi-foreign paintings such as those of the painters of the École de Paris. Set beside each other a Rouault and a Soutine, and it will be found without difficulty that the former outweighs the latter ... the French adds more, not science, but the gift of using it ... Only our painting is a complete painting.³⁰

Beckett's claim that the line of French painting terminates at the Galerie de France suggests that it is Dorival and his favoured painters that he has in his sights. In 1944 Dorival had curated 'Dix Peintures Subjectifs' at the gallery, including Fougeron, Gischia, Pignon and Tal-Coat, and in

exhibition *40,000 ans d'Art moderne: la naissance d'Art dans les grands centres préhistoriques* at the Musée Municipale d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1953. Beckett displays a prescient awareness of this process.

²⁶ Dorival (1946). Volume III is dated 23 December 1944 on the final page. In what follows I will quote from this volume as indicative of the wartime art criticism with which Beckett's essay is in dialogue. Frascatel's *Nouveau Dessin, Nouvelle Peinture: L'Ecole de Paris*, written during the war, appeared in 1945.

²⁷ Dorival (1946), p. 302. This is a quote from Bazaine's 'Recherches des Jeune Peintures', *Formes et Couleurs*, No. 6, Laussane, 1943, np.

²⁸ Dorival (1946), p. 321. ²⁹ Dorival (1946), p. 322. ³⁰ Dorival (1946), p. 323.

May 1945 his 'Le Cubism, 1911–1918' opened there.³¹ This gallery had, almost since its inception, been associated with the group of painters known as Les Jeunes Peintures Français, the title of an exhibition in May 1941 at the Galerie Braun.³² In his account of the exhibition, Dorival calls this group the 'keepers of the French conscience'.³³ The Galerie de France regularly showed these painters from its inception in February 1942.³⁴ In November 1944 it staged 'Maîtres et Jeunes de l'Art indépendant', which included the pre-war 'masters' Picasso, Braque, Lhôte, Léger and Desnoyer alongside the younger generation of Manessier, Fougeron, Pignon, Gischia, Tal-Coat and others. In his review in *Les Lettres Françaises*, Jean Bouret renamed this show 'Quatorze Peintures de l'École de Paris'.³⁵ The exhibition was a clear attempt to establish a continuity between the younger generation, working on the borders of abstraction and figuration, and a pre-war painting that had taken the experiments of Cubism and Fauvism and adapted them into a refined pictorial language that was understood as distinctively French. In October 1944 the same set of young painters had featured prominently in the Salon d'Automne where, as we have seen, Picasso's paintings had been attacked.

In a letter to MacGreevy on 19 August 1945, Beckett says, 'the same crowd, writing and painting, tops the bill that has topped it since the liberation. I had a glimpse of Geer van Velde, full of affectionate enquiries for you, but saw nothing of Bram'.³⁶ The brothers van Velde were at odds with the contemporary climate, which was one in which the painters of the Jeunes Peintres de Tradition Français were in the ascendant, largely due to the perception, promoted by Dorival and others, that they had kept the flame of French painting alive through the occupation. The painters themselves did nothing to defuse this sense of a vital national narrative leading up to the present.

For Bazaine, the central figure and theorist of the Jeunes Peintres, it is what he calls 'non-figurative' painting that is at the heart of this tradition. In his *Notes sur la Peinture d'Aujourd'hui* he is at pains to distinguish what he means by this from abstract art, which he associates with what he calls an 'académisme avant-garde'.³⁷ Such an art withdraws from both the world

³¹ Bernard (1944a); Bernard (1944b).

³² See Dorléac (2008), pp. 276–293. Adamson (2009), pp. 34–41.

³³ Dorival (1946), p. 298.

³⁴ See Dorléac (2008), pp. 392–404. ³⁵ Adamson (2009), p. 48.

³⁶ Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 19 August 1945, *LSB2*, pp. 18–22, pp. 19–20.

³⁷ Bazaine (1953), p. 46. This edition is updated with essays from the early 1950s – the original came out in 1948.

and from man, in whom the world is realized, resulting in an 'irrealism' that he rejects. For Bazaine, by contrast, the non-figurative is the embrace of this relation between man and world, interior and exterior, which he understands in terms that are clearly influenced by empathy theory of the Worringierian type, refracted through a Bergsonian vitalism. Thus he argues that the African artist is 'dominated by this universe (dream and reality at once) in which he bathes', so that 'the sign and the thing signified throb with the same life'.³⁸ Turning to medieval Europe, Bazaine sees a similar dynamic at work, though here a belief in monotheism subtends the relationship between the interior and the exterior forms, so that '*sensation is naturally incarnated*'.³⁹ This intimate, sensual relationship between body and world is what had to be reproduced by the painting, and it did not matter if the means for this latter was conventionally mimetic or not: 'if the sensation is incarnated in an immediately recognisable reality, or in an equivalent reality, there is in principle no difference in nature between the two processes, nor even of degree'.⁴⁰ As a result, he suggests a European tradition of non-figuration that is not a

function of the greater or lesser degree of resemblance of the work with external reality, but with an inner world that encompasses the first and opens out to the 'pure rhythmic patterns of being.' Zola is less lifelike (less abstract) than Mallarmé, Cormon is less lifelike (less abstract) than Klee, but Klee is less lifelike (less abstract) than le Douanier Rousseau. Kandinsky is much less abstract than Brueghel, Vermeer and Van Eyck: the last could well represent, in the history of painting, the extreme point of abstraction.⁴¹

Beckett, too, was strongly attracted to an art that pushed abstraction up against figuration, and would have agreed with Bazaine's reading of Netherlandish and Dutch realism as profoundly abstract. He was also deeply interested in the relationship between formal means and the representation of interiority, not to mention the relation between the interior and the exterior in general. Yet if, as argued in [Chapter 2](#), Beckett's anti-vitalist reading of Cezanne's portraits and landscapes as inhuman and atomized was to some extent a reaction against nationalist Bergsonian positions in the 1930s, the same reservations might be expected to colour his attitudes to Bazaine. In the rest of this chapter I will argue that this is indeed the case. Moreover, I will be suggesting that a recognition of these factors has significant consequences for our understanding of Beckett's relationship with contemporary philosophical positions, phenomenology

³⁸ Bazaine (1953), pp. 50–51.

³⁹ Bazaine (1953), p. 52: italics in original.

⁴⁰ Bazaine (1953), p. 56.

⁴¹ Bazaine (1953), p. 57.

in particular. For Bazaine's interest in interiority, and that of his contemporaries like Manessier and Tal-Coat, meant that their painting was understood as what Natalie Adamson calls a 'phenomenological act of engagement with the world'.⁴² This was recognized at the time by the phenomenologists themselves. Henri Maldiney, for example, published essays on both Bazaine and Tal-Coat in *Les Temps Moderne* and *Derrière le Miroir*, where a version of Beckett's second essay on the van Veldes was also to be found.⁴³ Hence it is not only Bergson against whom Beckett is pitching his monadism in the mid-to-late 1940s, but the powerful contemporary current of phenomenology too.

We can see Beckett ventriloquizing a discourse very similar to Bazaine's in 'Le Monde et le Pantalon'. Bazaine writes that the 'temptation to bring out of oneself, formless to the world, shocking, the same signs, the scars of one's most secret interior movements, is the *raison d'être* of painting since painting exists'.⁴⁴ Compare the moment where Beckett's essay declares, '[e]verything is an object for painting, not excluding states of the soul, dreams, and even nightmares, on the condition that their transcription is made with plastic means.' Beckett then abandons his ventriloquism to comment:

[w]ould it be by chance the use or the non-use of these devices that would decide the presence or absence of a given painting on the prescribed line [i.e. the line of French painting]?

In any case it would be useful, and even interesting, to know what is meant by plastic means. Yet no one will ever know. Only the initiated can pick up the scent.⁴⁵

Clearly the voice that Beckett mimics is a member of this initiate. Despite himself using the term in *Watt* and elsewhere, Beckett now describes the term 'plastic' as a kind of shibboleth used to reinforce the professional status of an elite circle.

Although Bazaine regularly uses the term 'plastic' in his criticism, Beckett's target here is once again more likely to be Dorival, who writes, to take one example, that 'at the heart of this conviction that a pictorial

⁴² Adamson (2005), pp. 114–125, p. 125.

⁴³ See Maldiney (1949a), pp. 988–1008. See also Maldiney's many publications in *Derrière le miroir*, Maldiney (1949b), pp. 2–3 and Maldiney (1950), pp. 8–10. Eight of Maldiney's essays on Tal-Coat can be found in Maldiney (1996). Beckett's 'Peintres d'Empêchement' was published in *Derrière le miroir*, no. 11–12, June (Paris: 1948).

⁴⁴ Bazaine (1953), p. 47. ⁴⁵ Beckett (1983), p. 121.

work is before anything a plastic work how can we not detect the French spirit of logic?⁴⁶ Although Beckett laments the plastic's lack of definition in contemporary criticism, Dorival does go on to give an example of what he means, referring to the way Pignon, Gischia and others require of their pens and pencils 'all they are able to give, but do not try to make them do anything that is not in their nature', so that if there is 'a game of light and shadow' when charcoal is used, for example, 'it is because it is of the essence of these tools to create chiaroscuro and model a sculptural form'.⁴⁷ There is a version of a Greenbergian notion of truth to materials here, a sense of the emphasis Dorival and others place not on subjective expression, but the exploration of formal problems internal and exclusive to painting as a medium.

Such a definition of painting presupposes skill, experience and a strong sense of aesthetic decorum, that is to say the ability to identify and exploit only those modes of mark-making inherent to the 'genius' of a particular tool, a procedure that is by no means as obvious as it initially seems. The master of such techniques, according to critics such as Dorival, was Georges Braque. It is significant then that Beckett uses a comparison with Braque to clarify the specific differences between Bram van Velde and the *Jeunes Peintres*. According to the essay, 'certain canvasses by Braque' *seem* to be 'plastic meditations' on the same kind of techniques that Bram uses. But these are only the tentative investigations of a 'hypothesis'. Beckett goes on, '[h]is [Bram's] means have the specificity of a speculum, existing only in relation to their function. He doesn't take enough interest in them to doubt them. He only interests himself in what they reflect.' In other words, this painting is not one which is entranced with its own operations and conditions, with formal investigations of problems internal to the history of painting. Indeed Beckett will insist that the distinguishing mark of Bram's work is its refusal to conform to the kind of elegant, sophisticated plastic painting of which Dorival approves. Thus he asks, '[b]ut suppose the definition was to be acquired [and] any gummyeyed fool before a given painting could shout: "It's good, the means are plastic," ... *What would be said, then, of the artist who would renounce it?*'⁴⁸ Hence Beckett's emphasis on what seem to be lapses in taste or technique in Van Velde's work, elements that are at odds with the consummate skill of someone like Braque. This is what he calls 'everything unreasonable, ingenuous, uncoordinated, badly-executed this painting presents', or again 'the categorial negligence that ... translates the urgency

⁴⁶ Dorival (1946), p. 322.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Beckett (1983), pp. 121–122. My italics.

and primacy of the interior vision so well'. Both of these descriptions are clearly an extension of what Beckett had earlier approvingly called a 'willed creative mismaking'.⁴⁹ Bram's interior vision necessitates a practice that will break out of the overly aestheticized, formal procedures of French modernism as it was being promoted at the time, and this is carried out through the deliberate abuse of materials rather than a loving fidelity to their supposed essence. The resonances here with the Kaun letter and the avant-garde techniques of *Watt* are obvious.

Beckett's reference to an 'interior vision' is modulated slightly later into an 'interior field': Bram's work reports from a space that 'now and then grants its faithful the chance to ignore all that is not appearance: in the interior field'.⁵⁰ The essay thus makes it very clear that this field is fundamentally 'shut in' (to recall the *Watt* manuscript's locution), cut off from the outside with no Bergsonian or Bazanian vitalist fusion of subject and object in evidence. Such is the import of Beckett's assertion that the interior field is the only place where 'the faithful' can 'ignore all that is not appearance'. Although this description seems initially very close to the procedure of a phenomenological *epoché*, the governing assumptions that have lead Beckett to this point are significantly different. Beckett does not see Bram's painting as allowing us to set aside the question of the source of visual sensation in an objective reality, in order to allow an examination of the intended images as they appear to the subject. Rather than being derived from a Husserlian bracketing, the procedure here is modelled on Leibniz's monad with its internal swarms of more or less clear and distinct *petites perceptions*. And so instead of an epistemological account, Van Velde's work licences an ontological one: what 'appears' there is the primordial structure of the monadic universe – 'space and body, complete, inalterable, plucked from time', as Beckett puts it – and this is why he insists that it is 'pointless to seek the originality of A. [Bram] van Velde outside this prodigious *objectivity*'.⁵¹ The latter phrase stresses the ontological aspect of the work, the sense that what Bram's interiority reveals is the inaccessible, inhuman structure of the world. Van Velde's monadic landscape is subsequently summed up in a memorable, paradoxical and characteristic image:

[i]t is there at last that one finally begins to see, in the dark. In the dark that no longer fears a dawn. In the dark that is the dawn and noon and evening and night of an empty sky, of an immobile earth. In the dark that illuminates the spirit.⁵²

⁴⁹ Beckett (1983), p. 122.

⁵⁰ Beckett (1983), p. 125.

⁵¹ Beckett (1983), p. 125, p. 127.

⁵² Beckett (1983), p. 126.

Beckett is here pitching a Leibnizian aesthetic against a Bazanian position that has affinities with phenomenology. As he explains it, the task of the painter is to materialize internal 'shut-in' space in an external, material art object so that 'the fundamental invisibility of exterior things . . . itself becomes a thing, *not a simple consciousness of limit*, but a *thing* that we can see and make seen, and make, not in the head . . . but on the canvas'.⁵³ The notion that exterior things are fundamentally invisible is not native to phenomenology, a philosophy more concerned with what Beckett calls a human 'consciousness of limit', the necessarily partial way we apprehend objects and the role of intention in completing the picture we have of the world. A truly phenomenological painting would attempt to inscribe these limits with a view to demonstrating the active role of the beholder in completing the image. By placing the depiction of 'invisibility' at the core of painting, Beckett speaks instead to his sense of the primordial isolation of all objects (including the human subject), and makes it the painter's task to find a positive material correlate for the inaccessible exterior world. The distinction that he makes between the canvas and the head repeats this opposition between a painting of the epistemological limit and a painting of the thing's impossible ontology. A painting 'in the head' is premised on the performance of a successful act of perception, as the beholder tests the processes of their own cognition before the image. Beckett associates the refinements of plastic painting with this phenomenological mode of comportment. Van Velde's 'mixture of mastery and boredom' realizes instead a Leibnizian sense of the artwork as monadic thing by emphasizing the external, material inscription of the image 'on the canvas'. In this way Van Velde detaches himself from Braque and 'a whole school of painting' by which Beckett means Bazaine, Tal-Coat and the other members of the so-called Nouvelle École de Paris.

Beckett's paradoxical insistence that the task of the painter is to materialize the invisible thing is picked up again when it is stressed that Bram van Velde's art involves the production of a non-mimetic image: '[h]e idealizes it, makes it into an internal sense. And it is precisely in idealizing it that he could realize it with this objectivity, this purity without precedent'.⁵⁴ The reference here to idealization recalls an earlier emphasis on a Frenhoferian isolation, withdrawal and imperviousness to the outside. In such circumstances, where the artist is 'shut in' or cut off from the world, and therefore unable to have direct perception, the image will necessarily be non-mimetic. Yet, in a moment that very clearly relies on Beckett's broader

⁵³ Beckett (1983), p. 130. My italics.

⁵⁴ Beckett (1983), p. 128.

vision of a primordially disaggregated ontology, it is precisely this 'internal sense' of the image, its private, detached quality, that guarantees its objectivity. In other words, it is through its very disconnection that van Velde's image grasps the monadic nature of the thing as a single, sealed unit. This is what Beckett means by making the invisible visible: finding the appropriate image for the fundamentally atomized nature of the real, limning what he now calls the 'dead thing'. A key passage makes this very clear. Bram's painting is a painting of:

the suspended thing [*en suspens*], I want to say the dead thing ... [*i*]n other words, the thing one sees there is no longer represented only as suspended [*comme suspendue*], but strictly as it is, really frozen. It is the thing alone, isolated by the need to see it, by the need to see. Immobile thing in the void, this at last is the visible thing, the pure object.⁵⁵

Here Beckett insists that the painting he admires does not merely excise the thing from its context in order to analyse it more carefully as an image. Once again this must be seen as an explicit attempt to distinguish his understanding of Van Velde's painting from the phenomenological *epoché*. The latter suspends the object by bracketing its reference both to the real and to the meaning-bestowing strategies mobilized by the intending subject. What is left after such an operation is the image as it appears in all its limited givenness, and this is the necessary starting point for any phenomenological analysis. Phenomenological bracketing, when the thing is, as Beckett calls it *en suspens*, suspended, (which is the French translation of Husserl's *Dahingestellt*, and also Merleau-Ponty's term for the *epoché* on the first page of his 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception*) thus produces an epistemological image, a partial, subjective, registration of the real.⁵⁶ By contrast, Beckett again insists that van Velde's image is an ontological one: the thing is revealed 'strictly as it is'. Following Schopenhauer rather than Husserl, Bram thus presents the ontology of the monadic thing 'cut from its moorings with everything ... seemingly cut from its moorings to itself'.⁵⁷ This recalls his 1934 description of Cezanne's 'incommensurability not only with life of such a different order as landscape but even with life of his own order, even the life ... operative in himself'.⁵⁸ Significantly, Beckett also returns to his rhetoric of atomization, petrification and mineralization at this crucial juncture in his description of Bram's work,

⁵⁵ Beckett (1983), p. 126.

⁵⁶ See Husserl (1907), p. 173; Merleau-Ponty (1945), p. 1: 'C'est une philosophie transcendante qui met en suspens pour les comprendre les affirmations de l'attitude naturelle'

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 130. ⁵⁸ *LSBI*, p. 227.

seeing it as 'akin to the insurrection of molecules, the interior of a stone a thousandth of a second before it disintegrates', so again linking his thinking here to his earlier letters on Cézanne, Yeats and Watteau.⁵⁹

The positions staked out in 'Le Monde et le Pantalon' are rehearsed more succinctly in 'The New Object', published in a catalogue to an exhibition by the two brothers at Samuel Kootz in New York from 8 to 27 March 1947, and reprinted in *Derrière de Miroir* in June 1948.⁶⁰ Here Beckett again homes in on the French tradition of the plastic and its critical defenders. After separating out surrealism and 'those estimable abstracteurs de quintessence Mondrian, Lissitzky, Malevich, Moholy-Nagy', Beckett goes on to examine the link between

Matisse, Villon, Braque, Bonnard, Kandinsky, Rouault and [in a tellingly tongue-in-cheek phrase] – what's the man's name? – Picasso, all the usual inevitables. The Christs and clowns of Rouault, the most Chinese still-life of Matisse, a conglomerate by the Kandinsky of 1943 or 1944, proceed from the same effort, the effort to state that in which Christ, a potato and a square of red are one, and from the same distress, the distress before the refusal of that oneness to be stated. For that in which Christ and the rest are one, as far as the painter is concerned, and beyond all question of idiosyncrasy, or exteriority or interiority, is that they are things, the thing, thingness.⁶¹

Matisse, Villon, Braque, Bonnard, Rouault and Picasso. This may not be exactly the same as the great tradition of French artists that Beckett saw in *Cahiers* as overly obsessed with plastic form, but it is very, very close. The decision to associate Kandinsky with them does not vitiate this connection. The very specific reference to a 'conglomerate . . . of 1943 and 1944' is a trace of the exhibition of the Russian's recent paintings and gouaches at Jeanne Bucher in January and February 1944. Villon had also been shown in Louis Carré during the war, as had Rouault of course. Yet if the broad target remains the same, the concern with the plastic has diminished. Beckett is more eager to chide French modernism's concern with broad, schematic epistemological investigations into what he calls 'less . . . the thing than . . . its thingness, less . . . the object than . . . its condition of being object'. A steady movement towards the ideal and the conceptual in the sequence 'things, the thing, thingness' suggests that tendency towards the transcendental with which he has been impatient for some time. The carefully chosen triad suggests that in the tradition he is describing abstract mental concepts (such as a square of red), supernatural figures (Christ)

⁵⁹ Beckett (1983), p. 128.

⁶⁰ Beckett (2011), pp. 878–880.

⁶¹ Beckett (2011), p. 879.

and actual everyday objects (potatoes) all have exactly the same status as objects of investigation. Once again this emphasizes the distance Beckett sees between such a phenomenological painting and the materialist work he will go on to attribute to the Van Veldes and to Bram in particular.

Towards the end of this second essay on the Van Veldes, Beckett sketches a distinction between the brothers' position and what he calls a 'critical' painting. In *Cahiers d'Art* Beckett had declared the 'great school' of modernist painting to be 'critical of its objects, critical of its means, critical of its goals, critical of its criticism'.⁶² Now by contrast in 'The New Object' Beckett argues that '[t]he painting of the Van Velde brothers emerges, *uncritical*, acceptant, from a painting of *criticism and refusal*'.⁶³ This is the decisive difference from the French school. The Van Veldes' work is not merely a critical account of the collapse of 'the old subject-object relation', but bears another relation to that crisis. Beckett's clarification of this marks the point at which his essay ups the ante and some of the vitriol of the first essay begins to return: 'every work of art is an *adjustment* of this revelation [i.e. the breakdown of the subject-object relation], *but not a criticism of it* ... in the sense that modern painting is'.⁶⁴ Understood correctly, this is a devastating comment, seeming to exclude French modernist painting from the status of the 'work of art'. And Beckett continues in this vein, when he goes on to describe modern painting's characteristic mode as 'a criticism that in its latest forms resembles the criticism, with a stick, of the absence of traction in a dead ass'. The last remark makes clear his outright scorn for what he had earlier called modern painting's 'long pursuit ... of thingness' and also, I suggest, for the criticism of Dorival, Frascatel, Diehl and Cassou that underpinned it.

But what exactly is this 'adjustment' of the revelation that Beckett associates with the work of art more worthy of the name? It can only be the 'acceptance' of the absolute non-relation between subject and object, object and object, subject and subject outlined at much more length in 'La Peinture des van Velde'. Rather than a French painting that refuses this, together with the consequences for aesthetic judgement it entails, and instead attempts a critical account of epistemological relations, the brothers accept the monadic condition and make it their own. Beckett's final description of Bram van Velde's painting demonstrates this by once again focusing on how such an art of non-relation is dependent upon mineralized, immured isolation: 'burial in the unique, in a place of

⁶² Beckett (1983), p. 126.

⁶³ Beckett (2011), p. 880. My italics.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* My italics.

impenetrable nearness, cell painted on the stone of cell, art of confinement'.⁶⁵ It is in the famous *Three Dialogues* with Georges Duthuit that this mission to detach Van Velde's work from the art of his time will reach its final stage. Here again, as we shall see, the larger intellectual and political context of the Parisian art world plays a key role in driving Beckett to explore and refine certain provocative but, for his own work, ultimately very productive ideas.

Duthuit was profoundly committed to an art history that opposed the Romano-Gallic to the Italo-Hellenic. Such beliefs brought him close to some aspects of the ideas of Jean Bazaine, André Lhôte and others associated with the school of French painting from which Beckett was keen to distinguish the work of Bram van Velde.⁶⁶ Like Beckett, Duthuit tended to read painting through a philosophical optic, though for him (and again this was something he shared with Bazaine and others), Bergson was the chief influence. Indeed it is to Bergson's ideas that Duthuit often appeals in order to justify his disregard for the Italians. Thus Duthuit dismisses the painting of the Renaissance because of its rigid reliance on linear perspective: such a parcelling up and organization of space betrays the *élan vital* that it is painting's duty to express. This belief, held steadfastly by Duthuit, was derived from his friend and early mentor Matthew Prichard. Prichard's Bergsonian conviction that abstract art was the most appropriate vehicle for intuitions of the transcendent dictated his rejection of Italian Renaissance painting, with its emphasis on geometrical space and the body.

There is evidence in the correspondence between Beckett and Duthuit that the former takes specific issue with such stylistic periodizations. As he tells Duthuit, again *à propos* of the Italians, 'I do not feel so keenly the break that you speak of.'⁶⁷ Beckett must be referring here to the theory that the Renaissance marked a deplorable rupture with an older Byzantine tradition which valued decoration over the representation of the human. This belief, vital to Duthuit, also derived from Prichard. On other occasions the question of Italian painting provokes Beckett to revisit earlier aesthetic positions in new and interesting ways. Thus on 9 June 1949, Beckett writes to Duthuit saying that he has finally grasped what 'separates us'.⁶⁸ As it turns out, it is the old question of aesthetic judgement: '[I]et

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Léon Gischia's statement that he is 'opposed to the realism of prior epochs, just as Byzantine or Roman realism was opposed to Italo-Hellenist naturalism'. Quoted in Adamson (2008), pp. 312–321. See also Duthuit, (1949), pp. 20–37.

⁶⁷ Letter to Georges Duthuit, 26 May 1949, *LSB2*, pp. 154–159, p. 156.

⁶⁸ Letter to Georges Duthuit, 9 June 1949, *LSB2*, pp. 165–166, p. 165.

us say it out clearly, once and for all, for I can only get more deeply entrenched: we are still in the world of competition, of winning and losing. What you complain about in the Italians ... is failure to take their chances ... for me their only mistake was believing *that they were doing the right thing, no matter by what means*.⁶⁹ Where Duthuit, despite his radicalism, remains wedded to a binary, hierarchical art history, Beckett here sees artistic practice as something that strikes at the root of all methods of valuation, and he proposes instead a radical indeterminacy as to both means and goals as an alternative.

The inclusion of Tal-Coat as one of the three artists considered in *Three Dialogues* means that such seemingly obscure questions of nationalism and its relationship with art and philosophy are highly relevant to the text, which has often been read as a kind of *sumum* of Beckett's whole aesthetic. Tal-Coat had been closely associated with Bazaine and the Jeunes Peintures Français; indeed he was included in the celebrated Galerie Braun exhibition of 1942. He had also exhibited at the Galerie de France from 1943, and would continue to do so until 1963. This is not surprising, as his painting is clearly indebted to the strain of French art against which Beckett had pitched the Van Veldes in 1945 and again in 1947. Through his connection with Bazaine, Tal-Coat had also imbibed the former's Bergsonism and Catholicism: Beckett wryly alludes to the latter when he refers to the painter's 'Franciscan orgies'.⁷⁰

Three Dialogues begins *in media res* with B.'s succinct description of Tal-Coat's approach to the object: '[t]otal object, complete with missing parts, instead of partial object'.⁷¹ This is in a continuum with Beckett's descriptions in 1946 of an art of the object that invited completion 'in the head'. That is to say the calculated ambiguity of the phrase 'complete with missing parts' implies that the object in the painting is both entire and lacking, suggesting an invitation to the beholder to engage in a kind of phenomenological labour to grasp it. Duthuit's reply is entirely typical, responding in kind to Tal-Coat's Bergsonism: '[t]he tyranny of the discrete overthrown. The world a flux of movements partaking of living time, that of effort, creation, liberation, the painting, the painter. The fleeting instant of sensation given back, given forth, with context of the continuum it nourished.'⁷² There is evidence in *Three Dialogues* and the correspondence between the two men on which it draws that Beckett reacts strongly against this vitalist aesthetic, as might be expected given his by now long-held wariness of such ideas. Witness the way

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.166. My italics.

⁷⁰ Beckett (1965), p. 102.

⁷¹ Beckett (1965), p. 101.

⁷² *Ibid.*

he describes a new and surprising disenchantment with Cézanne and van Gogh, artists he had previously praised lavishly. In the letter of 9 June both are dismissed as 'apoplectic, bursting at the arteries' in their urge to depict the truth of being.⁷³ Elsewhere, in response to Duthuit's opposition between Italian Renaissance formalism and a Bergsonian vitalist 'realism', Beckett dissents from Duthuit's approbation of the latter by seeing the two styles as being fundamentally the same in their sense of repletion: 'two maxima: one maximum in the possible, one maximum in the truth'.⁷⁴ Another even clearer example groups together the Italians, Matisse and Tal-Coat as 'those who, having, want more, and having the ability, want more still'.⁷⁵ The undoubted catalyst for this aversion to ideas of plenitude is Duthuit's exuberant Bergsonism and the ideas of authentic life that come with it.

It is this renewed revolt against Bergson that accounts for the sudden amplification of a set of references around fatigue, poverty, indigence and failure that occurs in 1949, references that then become firmly established as signature Beckettian tropes. Thus at the end of the second dialogue, D. quotes André Masson, writing lyrically of 'the things and creatures of spring, resplendent with desire and affirmation'.⁷⁶ Beckett's response to this and other provocations comes later when he says: 'let us, for once, be foolish enough not to turn tail. All have turned wisely tail, before the ultimate penury'.⁷⁷ Traces of this stubborn exaltation of indigence can be seen earlier in Beckett's thought and writing, but it now takes on a much greater importance, converted as it is into a kind of ontology. This new thought of impoverishment also involves a recalibration of the imagery through which Beckett describes the painting to which he is attracted. Ideas of the petrified, the inhuman and the inorganic are replaced by tropes of abjection, loss and negation. This is a departure from 'The New Object', which had at the core of its argument an insistence on the necessary 'acceptance' of the breakdown of subject and object and a corresponding suspicion of what was termed the 'virtuosities of negation'.⁷⁸ With the final phrase, Beckett alludes to the new prominence of Hegelian ideas in France, already in evidence before the war but now, due to Kojève and Sartre's appropriation of the Master and Slave dialectic, more apparent than ever. Beckett's desire to break from a French modernist vitalism thus renders his own position much more

⁷³ Letter to Georges Duthuit, 9 June 1949, *LSB2*, pp. 165–166, p. 166.

⁷⁴ Letter to Georges Duthuit, 26 May 1949, *LSB2*, pp. 154–159, p. 156.

⁷⁵ Letter to Georges Duthuit, 9 June 1949, *LSB2*, pp. 165–166, p. 165.

⁷⁶ Beckett (1965), p. 113. ⁷⁷ Beckett (1965), p. 122. ⁷⁸ Beckett (2011), p. 880.

assimilable to other contemporary currents. Rather than the emphasis on the Thing of 'La Peinture des van Velde' or the eponymous 'New Object' of 1947, *Three Dialogues* performs its own virtuosity of negation. It is not surprising, then, that Beckett's famous evocation of nothingness in the text has attracted the attention that it has, seeming as it does to locate his work within the familiar narrative of post-War French intellectual life. The phrase in question has become a critical nostrum: '[t]he expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.'⁷⁹ It is the contrast between this critically over-valued rhetorical moment and the more sustained narrative that I have been tracing back through Beckett's writing that I want to focus on here.

One major letter which can help is that of 9th March 1949. This is a response to an earlier communication in which Duthuit cites Robert Vischer, the key thinker in the development of empathy theory. Duthuit begins by quoting Masson again: 'I'm not in front of Nature, I am one with it', then comments himself: '[t]he origin of all this is movement', before introducing Vischer: '[t]he phenomenon of sympathy for the forms of nature will manifest itself through the act of transfer – the gift thanks to which the body of the artist communicates to the things of life his own movement (Robert Vischer).'⁸⁰ Here we can see how Duthuit's emphasis on flux and flow in Tal-Coat's works, while derived to a great extent from Bergson, also has roots in the German theories of empathy that Beckett had encountered in Hamburg and elsewhere. Duthuit's friend, the phenomenologist Henri Maldiney, was one of the main conduits whereby such ideas entered French art history and criticism, and he too combined Bergson and empathy theory in his writings on Tal-Coat.⁸¹ Like Duthuit, Maldiney championed a haptic, abstract art that he associated above all with Byzantine modes of the depiction of space. As he put it of Tal-Coat in 1949: 'his fundamental relationship with the universe is not one of aggression but of sympathy. His effort to coincide with himself, far from excluding the world, belongs to it. Through the world he touches himself.'⁸²

⁷⁹ Beckett (1965), p. 103.

⁸⁰ Georges Duthuit to Beckett 5 March 1949 in Labrusse (1988), p. 107.

⁸¹ For Maldiney and German art history see 'L'Art et Pouvoir du Fond' in Maldiney (1994), pp. 173–207. It was through Maldiney, for example, that Deleuze was introduced to Riegl and Worringer. See Deleuze (2005).

⁸² Maldiney (1996), p. 26. Like Duthuit and Masson, Maldiney was one of the circle that regularly met with Tal-Coat at his retreat in Le Tholonet near Aix in the late 1940s. See Rabaté (2014) and *LSB2*, p. 133, n. 5.

In his reply to Duthuit's Vischer letter, Beckett tries to get back to basics: '[l]et us start out this time from relation. That is where we seem to be closest.' What the two men share, it seems, is a sense that the painter faces both outwards and inwards, towards the world and towards the self. The relations towards the self and its internal images (which, I have argued, Beckett sees as Bram's main concern) are with an interior 'plurality', what Beckett will call in *Three Dialogues* a 'warren of modes and attitudes'.⁸³ Yet in the letter to Duthuit, Beckett is dismissive of the artist who exploits his or her interiority, enjoying his or her multiplicity in what he sees as a self-satisfied way. What is particularly fascinating for our purposes here, however, is that Beckett describes such complacency through a clear parody of Leibniz's universe:

what is at issue is the enjoyable possibility of existing in diverse forms, all of them, as it were, confirming the existence of the others, or each in turn confirmed by the one designated for that purpose and which, bursting with the visions thus obtained, indulges from time to time in a little session of autology, amid greedy sounds of suction.⁸⁴

Leibniz's view of each monad containing in potential a mirror of the entire universe, while actualizing one particular view or perspective on that universe, is, as Duthuit would have recognized, at the root of this description. The philosophical roots of the passage in post-Cartesian rationalism are further confirmed by Beckett's reference to Geulincx through the notion of autology.⁸⁵ Yet the *Monadology* is just the starting point for what is going on here. Beckett is describing an inverted, affirmative vision of the kind of ruined, monadic cosmos that he elsewhere employs to define Bram van Velde's painterly world. The universe that the letter describes is plural ('diverse'), pleasurable ('enjoyable') and vitalistic ('bursting with . . . visions' – compare the description of Cézanne and van Gogh 'bursting at the arteries') rather than the atomized, ruined, frozen one that Beckett develops in 'La Peinture des van Velde'. It is a mocking description of Tal-Coat's Bergsonian universe, one that bears a strong resemblance to what Duthuit, in *Three Dialogues*, exorbitantly calls the painter's 'global perception'. Yet it also provides a fascinating mirror-image of Beckett's own vision.

⁸³ Beckett (1965), p. 124.

⁸⁴ Letter to Georges Duthuit, 9 March 1949, *LSB2*, pp. 138–143, p. 139.

⁸⁵ Beckett's interest in Geulincx has a bearing on his appropriation of some aspects of Leibniz's thought, but an examination of that relationship is beyond the scope of this book. See Tucker (2014).

In Beckett's reading of Bram van Velde's work in *Three Dialogues* and the essays that preceded it, the basic structure of the model is the same as in the letter to Duthuit, i.e. a universe of isolated entities each one swarming with images. But here it is an austere world, with no sense of the immersive, empathic sensuality that animates the passage above. What this suggests is that Beckett is highly aware of the proximity of his vision of a painting of radical interiority to competing conceptions. Jean Bazaine, for example, also insisted on the importance of interiority for his abstract painting, writing that the 'power of interiority and of surpassing the visual plan . . . does not vary according to the degree of faithfulness with which the work of art depicts exterior reality, but according to an interior world which englobes the exterior'.⁸⁶ Similarly, in 1947 Alfred Manessier wrote, echoing Dorival, that the painter must show 'by authentically plastic means spiritual equivalences between the outside world and a more inner world'.⁸⁷ In his 1949 *Temps Modernes* essay on Tal-Coat, meanwhile, Henri Maldiney argues that 'the world is an interior through man. It is by man that the world becomes its own witness'.⁸⁸ The distinction between such attitudes and Beckett's notions of van Velde's work as a prospecting of the 'interior field' turns, crucially, on the question of the relation between the interior and the exterior. Although Bazaine and Manessier, like Maldiney, emphasize subjective, partial perception, there is, in Bazaine's 'englobing', Manessier's 'equivalence' and Maldiney's 'witnessing' a sense of transaction between inside and outside, subject and object. Beckett's dogged insistence on the 'shut in' and the interior as the place where 'all that is not appearance' can be ignored lacks this dimension. Instead Beckett takes the *epoché* to its most radical terminus in a totally autotelic, monadic scene where, as we shall see, the whole notion of relation is thrown into crisis.

In the letter of 9 March, Beckett draws on this distinction between the shut-in and the englobing when he argues that the complacent artist who records 'the enjoyable possibility of existing in diverse forms' is no different from a standard outward-facing naturalist painter. As he puts it, engagement in a 'little session of autology' means the artist 'can wallow untroubled in what is called non-figurative painting, assured of never being short of themes, of always being in front of himself [*d'être toujours*

⁸⁶ Bazaine (1953), p. 56.

⁸⁷ This was included in Diehl (1947), a compendium of essays and statements on abstract art by Manessier, Bazaine, Kandinsky, Léger and others.

⁸⁸ Maldiney (1996), p. 19.

devant lui-même] and with as much variety as if he had never left off wandering idly along the banks of the Seine.⁸⁹ Just as the Sunday painter insists on the subject–object relation as his *sine qua non*, so the painter who self-indulgently paints his or her own emotions or subjective impressions in a ‘non-figurative’ manner adopts the same basic comportment. Beckett very clearly has Bazaine, Manessier, Tal-Coat and the others in his sights here, for ‘non-figurative’ is precisely the term that Bazaine uses to contrast the abstract painting he supported from the more geometrical or objective painting of Mondrian and others. In *Le Temps de la Peinture*, Bazaine uses the term to place his own work in relation to the art of the past: ‘[t]he profound mistake is to continue to talk about the object, the “real” object, as if it had been, at one time or other, the “end” of the work of art and had not always been the “means”: all art was non-figurative.’⁹⁰ In doing so he underscores the roots of his own work in the external object, while simultaneously emphasizing that it is the artist’s subjective labour on the interiorized image of the object that matters. Yet this does not involve a break with the outside in the way it does for Beckett: quite the contrary. As Bazaine puts it, again reaching back into the past for justification, and using a very similar term to Beckett’s *devant lui-même*, ‘if, since art existed, men have used the outside world to express themselves . . . they did not distinguish it from their inner world, they recognized his face as their own face, in front of him [en face de lui], they felt neither masters nor slaves, neither parents nor strangers, they were him, indissolubly linked’.⁹¹ It is this form of the relation to the other that insists on fusion, yet somehow preserves the notion of being ‘in front of’, that Beckett reacts against in *Three Dialogues* when he describes Tal-Coat’s painting as ‘a composite of perceiver and perceived, not a datum, an experience’, resorting characteristically to a chilly positivist language (‘datum’) at the expense of the warmth of situated bodily ‘experience’ that animates Maldiney’s account of the same body of work.⁹²

According to Beckett, Bram’s work discounts this idea of the painter’s fundamental comportment being a relation with what is ‘en face de lui’, which Beckett describes in correspondence with Duthuit as ‘the state of being in relation as such, the state of being in front of’.⁹³ Van Velde refuses to take up the position of subject in relation to interior objects, just as he refuses it with reference to the exterior. As a consequence, the subject position of the painter becomes an object amongst other isolated objects.

⁸⁹ *LSB2*, p. 139.

⁹⁰ Bazaine (1953), p. 48.

⁹¹ Bazaine (1953), p. 48.

⁹² Beckett (1965), p. 102.

⁹³ *LSB2*, p. 140.

Duthuit asserts exactly the opposite to this in *Three Dialogues* when he says, in high-Bergsonian mode, of André Masson's depiction of objects, that 'he seeks to break through their partitions to that continuity of being which is absent from the ordinary experience of living'.⁹⁴ Beckett is clearly interested in a more monadic continuum, if such an oxymoron can be tolerated, when he writes to Duthuit: 'the *break* with the outside world entails the *break* with the inside . . . what are called outside and inside are one and the same', and slightly later: 'what interests me is what lies beyond the inside-outside'.⁹⁵ Here Beckett articulates the crisis of the object in a way that makes it clear that for him this crisis involves an exit from epistemological questions into ontological assertion.

Note the extremity of Beckett's ontology – an ontology that emerges in direct dialogue with contemporary French painting and its criticism. Beckett's monadic vision disaggregates the self into an infinite number of autonomous, recalcitrant elements that are as resistant to apprehension as are the things of the world. The 'warren of modes and attitudes' that terebrates the interior is thus in contiguity with the labyrinth of the exterior. This is the nature of the radical 'break' that Beckett speaks of, a break from epistemological issues of the relation between subject and object and towards the ontological assertion of a monadic universe. As a result of this break, the very distinction between subject and object is erased, along with that of the inside-outside. What we have as a result is a kind of flat ontology where subjects, objects, things, persons, images and voices all exist in a continuum. In a telling moment in the letter of 9 March, Beckett at first struggles to articulate the differences between this ontology and the kind of assumptions that underlie Bazaine's painting. 'Rather than being in front of them. He [Bram van Velde] is inside', Beckett begins, then asks 'is that the same thing?' Clearly this is not good enough – it is imperative to clarify van Velde's, and Beckett's, fundamental departure from the French modernist position and its philosophical supporters. So he tries again:

[r]ather he is them, and they are him, fully. And can there be relations within the indivisible? Full? Indivisible? Obviously not. Still life goes on. But with such density, that is, simplicity, of being that only eruption can get the better of it, give it movement, by forcing everything upward in one single mass.⁹⁶

Van Velde's intense interiority here exits in total exteriority: he is at one with the petrified, frozen, ruined world rather than in front of it. This is

⁹⁴ Beckett (1965), p. 111.

⁹⁵ *LSB2*, p. 140.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

not the empathic fusion beloved of Robert Vischer and his phenomenological heirs like Maldiney. Rather than consciousness joining with and transforming the world in Bazaine's sense, there is much more of a sense here of the self being colonized, mineralized by what is external to it. *Three Dialogues* calls this stony sense of being 'an unbearable presence, unbearable because neither to be wooed nor to be stormed'.⁹⁷ Even Beckett's turn to the idea of eruption as the only mode of action in this situation makes the link with the inhuman terrain of the geological, again recalling much earlier comments on Cézanne. He will return to the same language in early 1952 when, in his very short text for the invitation to Van Velde's show at Galerie Maeght, he refers to the work as 'living lava traces'.⁹⁸

As a consequence of all this, Beckett's understanding of aesthetic practice sees it as an immanent, spontaneous movement, one that breaks out within the continuum of being, rather than being imposed upon it from outside. Thus in *The Unnameable*, Beckett writes in the early stages of Worm's story:

he can't stir, it needn't be bonds, there are no bonds here, it's as if he were rooted, that's bonds if you like, the earth would have to quake, it isn't earth, one doesn't know what it is, it's like sargasso, no, it's like molasses, no, no matter, an eruption is what's needed, to spew him into the light.⁹⁹

The image is both cosmic ('it isn't earth') and mundane ('molasses'), with Worm himself seen as a world spinning in the void, its images generated internally and extruded outwards in the kind of mineral, volcanic movement that is elsewhere associated with Van Velde.

This notion of a completely isolated world or entity or monad amidst an infinite series of other such worlds is one that Beckett's prose work from the late 1940s onwards brings slowly into focus. The Van Velde essays and their engagement with debates in contemporary art criticism around the status of French modernism are the engines driving this development, which reaches its apogee in *The Unnamable*. The core ontological vision of a monadic universe of windowless worlds is clearly reflected when the entity of the text's title describes itself as 'a big talking ball, talking about things that do not exist, or that exist perhaps, impossible to know, beside the point', and then goes on: 'I always knew I was round, solid and round, without daring to say so, no asperities, no apertures, invisible perhaps or as vast as Sirius in the Great Dog'.¹⁰⁰ There are many other such Leibnizian

⁹⁷ Beckett (1965), pp. 110–111.

⁹⁸ See *LSB2*, p. 318.

⁹⁹ Beckett (1979), p. 335.

¹⁰⁰ Beckett (1979), p. 280.

images in the book. And yet despite the implication of an ontology of primordial disconnection, the voice of the novel is also compulsively animated by the spectral possibility that 'things exist', and that communication between subject and object is possible: 'And things? What is the correct attitude towards things?' the Unnamable asks, continuing, '[w]here there are people, it is said, there are things. Does that mean when you admit the former you must also admit the latter? Time will tell. The thing to avoid, I don't know why, is the spirit of system. People with things, people without things, things without people, what does it matter.'¹⁰¹ Throughout the book the windowless orb that seems to hover at its centre is in this way afflicted with images of people and things, but unsure if they, or the voices that describe them, are internal or external: 'Can it be innate knowledge?' the Unnameable enquires. And although the same voice concludes that 'this seems improbable to me', the possibility that all the images that percolate through the text are internal is another indication of the book's Leibnizian heritage.

This tension between an ontology of absolute autonomy, and an epistemological anxiety that still harbours the possibility of contact between interiority and exteriority, subject and object, reflects the central ambivalence of the aesthetic as it is worked out in Beckett's writing on painting. As we have seen on numerous occasions in this book, Beckett has a very strong conviction of the autonomy of the art object as something remote from considerations of both value and judgement. The artwork blocks judgement completely, resists it, scrambles the synthesizing powers of the imagination. Beckett thematizes this explicitly in *The Unnamable* through Mahood's story of the approach to the rotunda where his family lies, using terms – 'obligation', 'possibility', 'picture' – that echo the language of *Three Dialogues* while also making one of the most obvious allusions to Kantian aesthetics in his oeuvre:

[t]his obligation, and the quasi-impossibility of fulfilling it, engrossed me in a purely mechanical way, excluding notably the free-play of the intelligence and the sensibility, so that my situation rather resembled that of an old broken-down cart or bath horse unable to receive the least information either from its instinct or from its observation as to whether it is moving towards the stable or away from it, and not greatly caring either way.¹⁰²

The obligation to journey towards the rotunda full of corpses is here linked to the demand for judgement that the aesthetic object makes upon the beholder. However, it is only in a 'purely mechanical way' that the obligation can be met, rather than through the exuberant 'free-play' at the heart

¹⁰¹ Beckett (1979), pp. 267–268.

¹⁰² Beckett (1979), p. 293.

of Kantian aesthetic experience. We can recall here Watt's dutiful, serial, mechanized application of the concept in front of the abstract painting in Erskine's room. Yet in *Watt* the mechanization of judgement was still accompanied by what seemed to be a successful subjective response, namely Watt's tears. Similarly, here Beckett suggests that it is only a 'quasi-impossibility' that haunts the 'obligation' to approach the rotunda, rather than the impossibility that haunts the paradox of the 'obligation to express' in *Three Dialogues*. This qualification of impossibility is characteristic of *The Unnamable*. That is to say, with this *quasi*-impossibility of aesthetic judgement, *The Unnamable* holds open the faint suggestion that the 'obligation' to judge might actually be fulfilled, and with that the possibility of expression, communication and universality is also entertained. In the same way the novel holds open the faint possibility that the voices that the narrator hears might not be solely internal, that forms of relation still exist even in its ruined, monadic cosmos.

Hence we cannot simply take *The Unnamable* as a realization of the ontological assumptions that underpin *Three Dialogues* and the other essays in painting. Rather, the ontology that emerges in Beckett's art criticism, in reaction to specific historical circumstances and identifiable interlocutors, acts as a premise that allow oppositions of inside and outside, voice and silence, actual and virtual to be exhaustively explored in the novel. Having said that, the voice of the narrator clearly and constantly aspires to an autonomy which, for Beckett, is ultimately that of the resistant, implacable, monadic artwork. This is represented above all in the early stages of the novel by Malone, to whom Beckett attributes the condition he once gave to Jack B. Yeats: '*impassive*, still and mute, Malone revolves, a stranger forever to my infirmities, one who is not as I can never not be. I am motionless in vain, he is the god.'¹⁰³ Beckett goes on to admit that a second character is similarly remote before finishing: 'I alone am man and all the rest divine.'¹⁰⁴ This often overlooked admission on the Unnamable's part to his identity as 'man' is telling, associating the condition of the human with that of relation to a resistant, ambiguous, impossible other that is figured as both God and artwork. That the Unnamable cannot ever reach the status of Malone, cannot quite become a divine thing, is another indication that Beckett's urge towards the monadic is always compromised by the possibility of relation, even if that relation is only the recognition of a universal solitude.

¹⁰³ Beckett (1975), p. 275. My italics.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

'Sordid Abstraction'
Prose, Plays, Paintings

Third of January 1951. Beckett writes to Duthuit from Ussy, and begins by describing a walk he recently took across the 'half frozen, half muddy' countryside, where he encountered a 'Brouwer-style inn, peasants talking their heads off, drinking wine till it was time for an aperitif . . . I could hear them from a long way off'. A few lines later he turns to another, contemporary painter, Nicolas de Staël. Explaining his reservations about the latter's proposed set for *Godot*, Beckett complains that 'he sees the whole thing with a painter's eye. For me, that is aestheticism.' After arguing instead for 'a theatre reduced to its own means', Beckett brings up a third painter:

[d]o you really think that one could hear anything, faced with a set by Bram, or see anything other than him? In *Godot* it is a sky that is sky only in name, a tree that makes them wonder if it is one, tiny and shrivelled. I should like to see it set up any old how, sordidly abstract as nature is, for the Estragons and Vladimirs, a place of suffering, sweaty and fishy, where sometimes a turnip grows or a ditch opens up.¹

'Sordidly abstract', Beckett's description of how he envisages the visual presence of his most famous play onstage, combines aspects of the two Dutch painters he mentions in the letter. Brouwer's seventeenth-century realism is undoubtedly sordid, revelling in dirt, squalor, violence, drunkenness and poverty. The story that Beckett tells with great relish to Duthuit about the peasant inn confirms his attraction to such an art: an old man comes in, his wife having had a fall and broken her hip: '[y]ou had the feeling that he would like to finish her off with a shotgun', writes Beckett, going on to note how the crowd of drunken peasants make light of the man's misfortune. Brutality, unsentimentality, violence and excess:

¹ Letter to Duthuit, 3 February 1951, *LSB2*, pp. 217–221, pp. 217–218.

these are the aspects of Dutch realist painting that inform, to some degree, a play like *Godot*. Yet, as Beckett makes clear, the sordid qualities of Brouwer's tavern scenes must be qualified by another element, that which he calls, using a familiar term, 'abstraction'.

Note the way Beckett says nature is a sordid abstraction for *Vladimir and Estragon*. That is to say, the abstraction is subjectivized in the Kantian sense, based in the experience of the individual: it is not entirely a question of material form, although form, as we shall see, is implicated in it. Rather, abstraction is a condition where the image is put into question, even as it appears to the subject: 'a sky that is sky only in name, a tree that makes them wonder if it is one'. This recalls the Kaun letter's nominalism and Watt's perplexity in front of the visit of the Galls, to which we might add *The Unnameable's* declaration of love for 'dear incomprehension'.² And yet, as Beckett goes on to make clear, the things Gogo and Didi encounter are also concretely realized; they are 'sweaty and fishy', concrete sensations that again summon the empirical power of Brouwer and other genre painters while also attesting to the continuing importance for Beckett of a physiological poetics.

As we have seen, abstraction is a term or an idea that appears intermittently but insistently in Beckett's writing on art, yet he is not attracted to purely abstract painting. Mondrian, Orphism, Kandinsky and the French non-figurative painters of the immediate post-War period are all explicitly criticized (there are equivocations about Kandinsky, it is true, but the point still stands). The twentieth-century painters that Beckett praises: the Picasso of the late 1920s, Ballmer, Kirchner, Yeats, early Feininger and Rouault: all these painters produce work that hovers on the very edge of abstraction as we normally conceive it, yet never forgo the body. Even Bram van Velde remains attached to basic biomorphic forms that recall the human figure, often signalled by the representation of an eye-like motif. In Beckett's strange canon abstraction always seems to be working on something, taking it apart, 'eating into' it, in a favourite phrase. And the something being eaten into is at once the human body and the art surface itself. His habitual recourse is to a painting that is often figurative, yet shot through with a kind of distorting grid, mesh or torque that dismantles the fiction of the painting by drawing attention to the surface of the canvas and the material of the paint, emphatically defamiliarizing the devices

² Beckett (1979), p. 298.

and techniques of illusionistic depiction (perspective, modelling through shading, the use of advancing and receding colour).

Cubism is the ultimate source for such a practice, specifically the avant-garde event of Picasso and Braque's collaboration of 1909. Indeed the constant, yet often disavowed trace of Picasso's work in Beckett's thinking is testament to the importance of Cubism for the elaboration of his aesthetic. Cubism was an art that had two antithetical goals, expressing a contradiction at the core of the radical art and literature of the early twentieth century. First, the establishment of the artwork as a material object rather than a transparent window, and flowing from this, the exposure of the conventional, arbitrary and ultimately social nature of the sign. Second, the close interrogation of the sensual and the perceptual processes of the beholder, with the ultimate object of grounding the sign in some hitherto occluded authentic experience of the real, of sensation or of the subject itself. Beckett's visual aesthetic conforms to the first goal in that he associates the foregrounded materiality of the painting with the materiality of the body standing before it. As we have seen, he consistently explores this aspect of both subject and object through the tropes of petrification and mineralization that he associates with Leibniz and the monad. In this way, the autonomy of the painting in the world confirms the irreducible, abandoned singularity of the self amidst the rubble of the cosmos. Beckett acknowledges, however, that this mutual monadism of subject and art object, and the radical contingency it brings in its train, throws the very feasibility of the second goal of the authentic experience of the sign into doubt. Indeed, as we have seen over several chapters, the only possibility of authentic and communicable aesthetic experience is in the subject's registering of this condition of atomization and alienation. Such a registration is at the core of Beckett's own art, and its realization is deeply connected with formal notions of antithesis, juxtaposition and the production of unresolvable oppositions in the artwork. A key tension in the post-war work, I suggest, is that between realism – predominantly taking the form of the image of the human figure – and non-realism, akin to that between figuration and non-figuration in the modern painting to which Beckett was attracted. In what follows I will trace the significance of a broadly realist painting, including Dutch and Flemish genre painting of the seventeenth century and the work of Caravaggio, for Beckett's work in the 1950s and 1960s, demonstrating how Beckett deploys traces of realism as part of the larger formal strategy that is his version of abstraction.

We can begin by returning to the letter of January 1951. As Beckett puts it, after dismissing de Staël's ideas:

[t]hey have turned ballet and theatre sets into a branch of painting, and done them a great deal of harm, I think. It is Wagnerism. I do not believe in collaboration between the arts, I want a theatre reduced to its own means, speech and acting, without painting, without music, without embellishments.³

This is very close to contemporary statements by Clement Greenberg, arguing that the defining element of modern painting is that it foregrounds the specificities of its own medium.⁴ By saying this I am not suggesting influence in either direction. Greenberg's is a familiar late-modernist aesthetic formalism, heavily indebted to Kant, with no sense of the questions of the monadic thing, the inhuman and institutionalization that haunted Beckett and complicated his relationship to both Kant and Bergson. Yet Greenberg's theory emerges out of the same nexus of French and English debates as does Beckett's writing on Bram van Velde. Both men were concerned with the fate of modernist painting after the war, and both had profound reservations about the direction of French art.⁵ Greenberg's response was to evolve an aesthetic of autonomy that saw the wall-sized, all-over painting of Pollock, de Kooning and others as a new iteration of high modernism. Beckett's response, as we shall see in this chapter, issued in a body of work that cannot be assimilated to such an aesthetic. Indeed when Beckett's engagement with visual art is scrutinized, it becomes clear that his pronouncements on the autonomy of genre are placed under massive pressure by his own practice. In this respect it is highly significant that Beckett's work, in its movement between realism and non-realism, provided a vital resource for visual artists and art critics struggling with Greenberg's hegemonic position in the 1960s. The congruence of the passage I have just quoted with Greenberg's ideas of medium-specificity is an indication of the way Beckett's post-War aesthetics operate in proximity to influential contemporary debates on painting, but the divergence is much more important, suggesting a distinction from the Cold War modernism to which Beckett is often assimilated.⁶

Beckett's 1951 proscription of the mixing of genres is repeated in later years, and the flipside of this proscription, for Beckett as for Greenberg, must be that each genre attends to and exploits to the utmost those elements that are peculiar to it. For drama, those elements are, as Beckett points out in the letter, speech and acting, though it is useful to add

³ *LSB2*, p. 218. ⁴ See Greenberg (1961), pp. 3–21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 'The School of Paris: 1946', pp. 120–123.

⁶ See for an egregious example see Jameson (2004), pp. 202ff.

movement, stillness and gesture as sub-sets of the second term. Just as Greenberg thought that the relation between paint and a flat surface was the essence of painting, so Beckett's notion of abstraction, as it develops through his experiments in drama, involves a similar focus on what he here calls the 'means'. Yet it is important to note the difference in the means employed by drama and painting, a difference that turns on the presence of the human body. Greenberg's 'means' have no vestigial attachment to figuration; indeed this lack of attachment is essential to his definition of abstract painting as 'a pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colours, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors'.⁷ It is rather more difficult to imagine a theatre without actors onstage (although *Breath* manages it).⁸ Theatre, no matter how abstract in terms of its formal devices, relies upon the presence of the human figure, and in this it is analogous to the broadly figurative art to which Beckett was attracted. Indeed the success of such art, as Beckett's readings of Giotto, Poussin, Cézanne, Giorgione, the Naumberg Master, Picasso, Watteau, Yeats and Bram van Velde make clear, resides in a fundamental tension between representation and non-representation, empathic identification and distance, the contingent sign and the authentic material body. Beckett sees the juxtaposition between these sets of elements as unresolvable, and indeed cultivates this irresolvability. As a result, Beckett's abstraction never leaves behind the body, despite an anguished commitment, equal to Greenberg's, to the notion of a formally replete art. Figuration, naturalism, realism, whatever one wants to term it, is thus a vitally important component in Beckett's challenge to modernist aesthetics, for it is through the varieties of realism that the autonomy of art is challenged by the everydayness of history and the body. Beckett's unlikely interest in Dutch painting provides him with one important resource in this endeavour.

In 1924, in the sole issue of the Dublin journal *The Klaxon*, Thomas MacGreevy had contrasted a modernist art based on abstraction with what he called 'the dead Dutch boors' hanging in the Irish National Gallery.⁹ MacGreevy's dismissal of the large collection of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting in Dublin was a typically modernist one. The novel and genre painting came into being at the same time and have often been seen as expressing the world-view and modes of consciousness of a new bourgeois class. These pictures of tavern interiors, peasant homesteads

⁷ See Greenberg (1961), p. 7. ⁸ Beckett (1990), pp. 369–372.

⁹ MacGreevy (1923–1924), pp. 24–26.

and other quotidian scenes were also very important to the rise of a specifically realist fiction in England and France two centuries after they were painted. George Eliot, Balzac and Hardy all drew on the details and concerns of Dutch genre painting as both model and justification.¹⁰ By attacking them, MacGreevy is attacking a whole aesthetic. For Beckett, however, *pace* MacGreevy, there is a deep fascination with realism in painting, and in particular Dutch genre scenes. This is evident from the notebook, dating most probably from the end of 1934, packed with his notes on Reginald Wilenski's *Introduction to Dutch Art*, as well as lists of paintings Beckett saw in Dublin, London and Paris. But the interest was a constant throughout his whole life, as Knowlson points out.¹¹

The association between genre painting and the realist novel is enough to give pause when thinking about the role such pictures played in the development of Beckett's ideas. George Eliot's name is not often raised alongside Samuel Beckett's, but both had an interest in genre painting. Indeed *Adam Bede*'s frequently cited manifesto of realism – one based on a description of Dutch genre painting – summons a space where, with some adjustments of perspective, the imaginative terrain of the two writers strangely overlaps:

do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world – those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs, and their clusters of onions.¹²

One thinks here of *Godot*, with its famished characters or indeed, as we shall see, Sapo's story in *Malone Dies*, which might be taken as a parody of realist fiction. Dutch genre painting is not all about rogues and boors and skivvies, however. While there is a strong tradition of knockabout and satirical representation, to which Beckett was by no means immune, there is also the much more intimate mode of images of single figures carrying out everyday tasks in often strikingly lit interiors. We can trace both elements of genre painting in Beckett's work and thought; however, I will be suggesting that where the peasant scenes are evoked as part of Beckett's engagement with and critique of realism, the anonymous portraiture pioneered by the Dutch has a different impact, and is in particular a very important component of his exploration of the representation of subjectivity.

¹⁰ See Yeazall (2009).

¹¹ See Knowlson (2009), pp. 27–44.

¹² Eliot (2008), p. 196.

The use of lighting was one of the ways in which the Dutch painters prosecuted the extraordinary breakthroughs made by Caravaggio in the use of *chiaroscuro*. Beckett was interested in the history of such effects, perhaps through reading Wilenski's section on their deployment in Dutch and Italian art.¹³ Indeed he was confident enough in his own expertise to dispute Wilenski's account, arguing that *chiaroscuro* did not necessarily originate in Italy with Raphael but could be traced as far back as the early Netherlandish painters such as Geertgen tot Sint Jans and his *The Nativity at Night*.¹⁴ Dutch painting of the seventeenth century secularized *chiaroscuro* so that its dramatic effects were no longer restricted to Biblical themes, but were used to frame and dignify the activities of everyday life: a solitary figure listening, or reading; someone making lace; someone sleeping. Vivid composition and striking colour contrasts began to lend weight to scenes that in themselves are remarkable only for their familiarity.

Several critics have noted the contiguity between the light-effects in such paintings and George Eliot's pictorial realism.¹⁵ A good example is Geerit Dou's *The Sinner's Grace*, which lies behind *Adam Bede*'s description of an 'old woman . . . eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessities of life to her'.¹⁶ Although a religious element remains explicit here, the details picked out by the dramatic lighting in the original painting are deliberately mundane, the figure is anonymous and the surroundings are unremarkable: pots, pans and the ubiquitous cur.

We can compare Eliot's interior with the following from *Malone Dies*:

Sapo remained alone, by the window, the bowl of goat's milk on the table before him, forgotten. The room was dark in spite of the door and window open on the great outer light. Through these narrow openings, far apart, the light poured, lit up a little space, then died, undiffused . . . And at the least abatement of the inflow the room grew darker and darker until nothing in it was visible any more. For the dark had triumphed. And Sapo, his face turned towards an earth so resplendent that it hurt his

¹³ Knowlson (2009), p. 41.

¹⁴ Beckett would later mark Geertgen's *John the Baptist* in his catalogue from the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in 1937. See GD., 13.1.37. As argued in Chapter 3, Beckett's concern to redress perceived art-historical bias towards Italian art of the Renaissance in favour of earlier, late-medieval Northern European painting is very much part of the intellectual climate of the 1930s.

¹⁵ See Witemeyer (1979). ¹⁶ Eliot (2008), p. 195.

eyes, felt at his back and all about him the unconquerable dark, and it licked the light on his face.¹⁷

The section in *Malone Dies* from which this passage is taken recounts a young man's visits to the Lamberts, a family of peasants. At the moment of the description he is 'in the filthy kitchen, with its earth floor' where a clock ticks, a hen struts and a woman sorts lentils amidst the 'life-long pots and pans'. Here he is visited by 'the fond impression of having been present at everyday scenes of no import'.¹⁸ The latter description in particular is a clear reference to genre paintings of peasant interiors of the kind popularized by Adriaen van Ostade, who, as Wayne E. Franits points out, represents a shift from the disreputable, comic tavern scenes of Brouwer to something more decorous and domestic.¹⁹

While we cannot link this description to a particular painting, Beckett also seems to draw from another kind of scene extremely common in Dutch genre painting. There is a whole sub-genre of paintings with anonymous figures sitting or reading beside windows, often bathed in light, and Beckett knew many examples from Terborch, Metsu and Dou.²⁰ Such scenes often had the sitter partially turned away or in profile, as if they were ignoring or unaware of the eye of the viewer. As Harry Berger points out, these pictures trouble the boundaries between genre painting and portraiture, raising intriguing issues for the relationship between painting and beholder.²¹ When, slightly later in the account of his time with the Lamberts, Beckett returns Sapo to the table by the window, he gives him exactly such an occluded posture: '[b]ig Lambert sat by the window, smoking, drinking, watching his son. Sapo sat down before him, laid his hand on the table and his head on his hand, thinking he was alone. Between his head and his hand he slipped the other hand and sat there marble still.'²² Similar scenes are very common in Beckett's later plays and work for the screen. Think of F in *Ghost Trio*, 'seated on a stool, bowed forward, face hidden', of B in *Nacht und Träume*, 'bowed head resting on hands' and of L in *Ohio Impromptu*, '[b]owed head propped on right hand. Face hidden.'²³ There are dozens of other examples.

¹⁷ Beckett (1979), p. 186.

¹⁸ Beckett (1979), pp. 185, 199, 188.

¹⁹ See Franits (2008), p. 139.

²⁰ Many examples from collections in Dublin and London are listed in the art notebook. See UoR MS5001.

²¹ Berger (2000), p. 183.

²² Beckett (1979), p. 195.

²³ Beckett (1990), p. 445.

Michael Fried's account of the depiction of absorption in painting, mentioned in [Chapter 4](#), can again give us some purchase on Beckett's repeated recourse to images of static, remote and seemingly thoughtful figures. Fried argues that the depiction of withdrawal encourages the painting's beholder to

read that lack of outward expression as an unmistakable sign of intense inwardness and sheer depth of feeling, as if in the presence of certain extremely slight but nevertheless telling visual hints or cues the illusion of absorption, which is to say the endowing of the figures in question with an imagined inner life comparable, if not superior, in intensity to the viewer's own, proves irresistible.²⁴

This description of 'a lack of outward expression', implying an 'intense inwardness and depth of feeling', describes the affective climate of certain images of solitary thought in Beckett's drama in particular. It also chimes with Beckett's attraction to mysterious, withdrawn enigmatic images that are nonetheless highly realist. I am thinking here of the pictures and sculptures by Franciabigio, Giorgione, Cézanne and the Naumberg Master that we have considered in detail previously. What is more, Fried sees techniques of *chiaroscuro* as a major contribution to what he calls here the 'illusion of absorption'. Such absorptive devices first appear in the sixteenth century with Caravaggio, and here too we can see useful analogues with Beckett's descriptions of both posture and light. In Caravaggio's painting Fried sees

an emphasis on what, owing to basic conditions of visibility, cannot be exposed, because it is turned away from us, or blocked from view, or excluded from the field of vision, or obscured by dark shadow, or simply devoured by the unprecedented blackness of Caravaggio's painted grounds.²⁵

Fried here alights by chance on the same terminology that Beckett often uses when considering painting and the construction of character, but the serendipity is instructive. Recall in *Dream* the way Balzac's characters were 'devoured by their backgrounds'. This is modulated by the description of the background of Franciabigio's young man as a 'site of . . . unknotting'.²⁶ In the Kaun letter, the word 'devoured' returns as Beckett imagines the word surface 'devoured by huge black pauses'. And later Beckett describes Antonello da Messina's *St. Sebastian* as 'eaten into by the human', probably referring to the way its geometricized space of black and white tiles

²⁴ Fried (2010), p. 147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Beckett (1992), p. 13.

creates the illusion of a receding plane.²⁷ It is thus significant that in the description of Sapo, too, the darkness of the background 'licks the face' of the young man: here darkness is personified, given a mouth that blurs the edges of the human, so that character is defaced even as it is portrayed. Tracking Beckett's notion of a devouring background back over two decades in this way suggests the continuity of his correlation between the unknowable spaces of interiority and the treatment of the art surface that he sees in Cézanne, Yeats and Bram van Velde.

For Fried too, Caravaggio's use of darkness contributes to a new sense of interiority but also abstracts the surface of the canvas, lacing it with vertiginous gulfs, and it is the latter formal departure that is experienced by the beholder as, in Fried's term, 'unprecedented'. The passages that I have been quoting from *Malone Dies* adopt tactics very similar to these. In the first scene most, and gradually all, of Sapo's surroundings are obscured by shadow. In the second, Sapo is described in a posture and mood of withdrawal, ignorant of his companion's very presence. In both cases the weight of Beckett's emphasis is on what cannot be exposed, and it is this consistent pull towards the occulted that links the obscure interiorities of both Sapo and Lambert to the vivid descriptions of the darkened kitchen, just as it links figure and ground in the paintings that Fried considers.

The second scene, where Sapo and Big Lambert sit together, also exemplifies an important variation on Beckett's depiction of absorption, one that first appears in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* in certain scenes between Belacqua and the Alba, recurs in *Murphy* and is subsequently found in Beckett's letters on Cézanne, Watteau and Yeats.²⁸ In each of these cases we find two absorbed figures sharing a space, and the possibility or impossibility of communication between them is tested. More precisely, the lack of communication becomes itself an 'impossible' point of contact in exactly the way that Beckett understood the relation between painting and beholder in his analysis of Yeats in 1937. Thus, to return for a last time to Lambert and Sapo:

[t]here they sat, the table between them, in the gloom, one speaking, the other listening, and far removed, the one from what he said, the other from what he heard, and far from each other. The heap of earth [with which Edmund Lambert is burying a mule] was dwindling, the earth shone

²⁷ Letter to Georges Duthuit, 27 July 1948, *LSB2*, pp. 84–89, p. 86.

²⁸ See Beckett (1992), pp. 167–168. Beckett (1977), p. 21.

strangely in the raking evening light, glowing in patches as though with its own fires, in the fading light.²⁹

This passage brings together the two elements of withdrawal and *chiaroscuro* that I have taken from Fried's analysis of absorption. A painterly language of light is deployed, and the description of the earth 'glowing in patches' echoes the *chiaroscuro* of the earlier scene where Sapo is alone at the table. However, the implication of a random distribution of isolated islands of light also serves to complement the remoteness of the two characters, each occupying their own stranded consciousness, and finding a common ground through that isolation.

Beckett thus seems to be drawing on a broadly realist tradition in the ekphrastic scenes of Sapo's story. But having said that, it remains true that this is an interlude in a novel, a trilogy of novels, that subjects all the traditional devices of realism to a relentless mockery. As such, according to John Pilling, the Sapo narrative is 'stubbornly out of kilter with the rest of the story' in its seeming naturalism. This should give pause, as should Beckett's own admission that he himself did not like this section of the book.³⁰ Why might this be? One possibility is that the use of ekphrasis dominates this section in ways that are not adequately challenged by the text's specifically literary resources. The pictorial dominates, and literature limps along behind. Although it is a parody, Sapo's story comes uncomfortably close to the standard realist reliance on visual devices and allusion to paintings in order to secure emotional affect. To some extent, Beckett attempts to defuse this problem by drawing attention to the narrator's manipulation of the visual. Thus the constant attention to the details of light and dark, to the encroaching gloom as evening falls, to the lighting and extinguishing of lamps and the effects of this on the strength of the light from outdoors, is foregrounded by Malone's comment, '[n]othing is less like me than this patient, reasonable child, struggling all alone for years to shed a little light upon himself, avid of the least gleam, a stranger to the joys of darkness.'³¹ Such comments emphasize the conventional, structural and symbolic status of the ostensibly realist literary effects of light and shadow. This is emphasized further by the way a basic *clair-obscur* polarity of whiteness and blackness is thematized at the level of narrative: 'the mule had been black, the rabbit had been white', we are told; 'I'll kill Whitey tomorrow', the father says suddenly at one point, leaving us to conjecture

²⁹ Beckett (1979), p. 195.

³⁰ See Pilling (2014), pp. 121–135, p. 135.

³¹ Beckett (1979), p. 178.

as to who or what Whitey is. And all the while the narrator himself, lying in bed, is watching the light from the moon – 'Dearest of lights, wan, pitted, least fatuous of lights' – move across his own window, once again stressing effects of *chiaroscuro*.³² All this suggests how the frame of the Sapo story is pierced, so to speak, by the position from which it is narrated: the conditions of Malone's sequestration are dictating the form his narrative takes. Such devices serve to denature the realist image, and yet they struggle to combat the affective traction of that visual image itself. Beckett's characteristic pitching of the real against the formal, the figure against the abstract, does not achieve the aporetic balance for which he strives here. In Sapo's story the sheer interpellative power of the realist tradition wins out over the meta-textual devices that attempt to constrain it, and this, I suggest is the reason for Beckett's dissatisfaction.

In *The Unnameable* such tensions between formalist or structural play and realist or naturalist representation are also present, but interact in a much more vigorous and productive way. The basic duality of beholder and image that obtains in Beckett's previous texts, whether between a subject and a painting as in *Watt*, or a narrating subject and a painterly image, as in *Malone Dies*, is now inverted to produce a more indeterminate relation. Rather than the narrator encountering or otherwise relating to a visual scene, the narrative voice is identified with a material art object or image, and a second character is projected as the beholder of that image.

Take this very early passage, when the narrator's posture is described in detail: 'I know I am seated, my hands on my knees, because of the pressure against my rump, against the soles of my feet, against the palms of my hands, against my knees . . . My spine is not supported.'³³ This is the 'Memnon pose' that Beckett has already mentioned by name in *Malone Dies* and which will appear again later in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, referring to the posture of the two colossal statues at Thebes that stood guard over Amenhotep's mortuary temple.³⁴ Highly evocative images of these enormous sitting figures, their outlines and profiles porous and ruined by time, had been circulating in French print culture since Napoleon's Egyptian campaign in 1798. Beckett may also be remembering here the Egyptian statuary that so impressed him in Berlin.

More importantly, the Memnon pose provides Beckett with an image of massification, petrification and mineralization of the kind that he associates with his ontology of disconnection, seeming to limn a monadic position for the text's voice. This impression of an absolute, archaic,

³² Beckett (1979), p. 197, p. 185.

³³ Beckett (1979), p. 279.

³⁴ Beckett (1996), p. 69.

windowless isolation is confirmed when, shortly after describing the Memnon posture, we read of the 'great smooth ball I carry on my shoulders, featureless, but for the eyes, of which only the sockets remain'. There follows the admission, the first of many, that the book is driven by this inhuman, material object's need to bring into being its own beholder: 'a without, it's easy to imagine, a god, its unavoidable, you imagine them, easy, the worst is dulled, you doze away, an instant'.³⁵ This is what I was referring to earlier as the inversion of the beholder–painting relation. Rather than the structure of the bed-ridden Malone imagining a Dutch genre painting, we have an Egyptian sculpture summoning its viewer. The subsequent appearance of another entity, Mahood in his jar, whose posture mimics that of the Memnon figure, is thus a result of a projection that the Memnon entity carries out in order to confirm itself. Mahood is an image, a moment, to draw again on Beckett's Leibnizian researches, when internal ideas and impressions become 'clear and simple' and a stable intersubjective existence flickers momentarily into being.

Crucially for the text's mode of unfolding, however, the vase, jar or display case which Mahood occupies – and thus by extension Mahood himself – is described as another material artefact, at once vulgar advertising image and sculpture:

a kind of landmark, not to say an advertisement, far more effective than for example a chef in cardboard, pot-bellied in profile and full-face wafer-thin. That she [i.e. the proprietor of the restaurant across from which Mahood is situated] was well aware of this was shown by the trouble she had taken to festoon my jar with paper lanterns, of a very pretty effect in the twilight and a fortiori in the night, And the jar itself, so that the passer-by might consult with greater ease the menu attached to it, had been raised on a pedestal at her own expense.³⁶

Furthermore, Mahood too is in a relation of confirmation with a beholder, the fundamentally aesthetic nature of which the narrator is careful to note: 'I seem to exist for none but Madeleine', he says, another reference to the woman who cleans his jar and ensures it is 'artistically illuminated from dusk to midnight'.³⁷ He then goes on:

[h]ow all becomes clear and simple when one opens an eye on the within, having of course previously exposed it to the without, in order to benefit by the contrast . . . the bliss of what is clear and simple. The next thing is to somehow connect this with the unhappy Madeleine and her great goodness.

³⁵ Beckett (1979), pp. 279–280.

³⁶ Beckett (1979), pp. 301–302.

³⁷ Beckett (1979), p. 316, p. 313,

Attentions such as hers, the pertinacity with which she continues to acknowledge me, do not these sufficiently attest my real presence here, in the Rue Brancion?³⁸

The strong implication of Mahood's need to 'somehow connect' Madeleine with the 'bliss of the clear and simple' that transpires when one 'opens an eye on the within' is that Madeleine is a wholly invented, interior image. The explicit use of the formula 'clear and simple' sends us back to Beckett's philosophy notes of the early 1930s where the 'clear and distinct' thoughts that Descartes saw as the foundation of knowledge are interpreted as actualizations of the confused multitude of Leibnizian *petit perceptions*.³⁹ As we have seen, in the German diaries the same process was associated with the aesthetic experience, where actualization is linked with the prayer that the artwork 'sets up and releases' in the beholder. Later, in 'Le Monde et le Pantalon', these Leibnizian terms were used to consider the creative process itself, and the production of a clear and simple image was understood as the interior actualization, by the artist, of a primordial monadic ontology. Taken in this context, it is evident that Mahood is also actualizing such an image, although here the 'thing' that emerges is the confirmatory gaze of an other. In other words, Madeleine is the momentary resolution of the seething field of Mahood's *petit perceptions* into the stable image of a beholder, one that acts to stabilize his 'real presence' as an artefact. In this way the whole history of Beckett's thinking of subject and object through the visual arts lies behind *The Unnameable*'s strange conceptual framework. The universe that it describes is one of endlessly nested fictions of artwork and audience, akin to Leibniz's comparison of 'matter to a garden of flowers or a pool of fish, and every flower another garden of flowers and every corpuscle of every fish another pool of fish', as Beckett had described it as far back as *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*.⁴⁰

Yet the formal, structural deployment of the dualities of narrator and scene, artwork and necessary beholder also profoundly troubles the borders between inside and outside in *The Unnameable*. That is to say, although the ontology that Beckett describes is monadic, the text's aspiration toward the self-contained, hermetic artwork as fundamental unit is continually undermined by the pressure of a need for a beholder, an audience, a reader and ultimately a world that is its necessary correlation. What is more, the characteristic movement of the text is that beholder and world are

³⁸ Beckett (1979), p. 315.

³⁹ TCD MS 10967/183. Feldman (2006), p. 97.

⁴⁰ Beckett (1992), p. 47.

imagined with such an intensity that they eventually usurp and displace the object beheld, so that the centre of narrative gravity moves to a new level, only for the process to begin again. It is a movement that is particularly clear in the case of the story of Mahood, for it is here that the novel is most relentlessly deitic. That is to say, it is with Mahood, more than any other section, that the real, the historical and the everyday are juxtaposed with the novel's metafictional mechanisms. This is signalled nicely by the insistence that the vase is 'here in the Rue Brancion', a street in the 15th arrondissement at the entrance to what was one of Paris's main slaughterhouses. There are many other moments in the text where Beckett insists on this exact geographical location for Mahood's story, from the reference to the bust of 'the hippophagist Ducroix' to the comments on the smell and the flies.⁴¹ These are details carefully chosen to supply the feel of the experiential. Indeed Beckett's choice of the slaughterhouse district as setting must have been dictated, in part, by the opportunities that the area afforded for descriptive passages that exploit sense impressions to an extreme. The upshot is a profound sense of the proximity of the real in the Mahood passages, an intense, physical, 'sordid' quality that balances the formal games that are played out at the same time.

Yet *The Unnameable's* appeal to realism is not allowed to remain unambiguous, and visual culture again has its part to play here. The Parisian slaughterhouses were a major locale for the surrealist imagination, as Beckett would have known well. In 1929 Bataille's *Documents* had included three of Eli Lotar's photographs of slaughterhouses, alongside Bataille's own text 'Abattoir'.⁴² André Masson produced several paintings on the theme in the same period.

Much closer to *The Unnameable's* moment of composition, George Franju's 1948 documentary *Le Sang des Bêtes* had been a controversial success. Reviewed favourably by Cocteau, this twenty-minute film had been shot in La Villette and Vaugirard, the latter being the slaughterhouse on Rue Brancion.⁴³ It contains several images also present in *The Unnameable*, such as a shot of the bust of Emile Ducroix, described as a 'propagateur de la viande de cheval 1821-1900'.⁴⁴

In all of the surrealist work based on the Parisian slaughterhouses realism is positioned on the very cusp of horror. Indeed Franju's film makes this a principle of its construction, by juxtaposing graphic images

⁴¹ Beckett (1979), p. 132.

⁴² Bataille (1929), pp. 328-330.

⁴³ J. Cocteau, *L'Intransigeant*, 8 Sept. 1949. See Ince (2005), p. 32, n. 35.

⁴⁴ See Ince (2005), p. 31.

of butchery with quiet scenes from the surrounding suburban streets. For independent surrealists like Masson, Bataille, Lotar and Franju, the graphic, visceral image of the slaughterhouse thus represents above all the extremity at the heart of the everyday. The slaughterhouse is a privileged image for the surrealist avant-garde, because it confirms the suggestion that reality is itself surreal, and that there can be no tenable distinction between the procedures of art and imagination on the one hand, and the operations of the actual on the other. Mahood's story also acknowledges this continuum, grounding the novel's rarefied formal experiments in a hyperbolically material world of blood, meat, stench and gustation. The narrative's clear ekphrastic intertexts with the surrealist slaughterhouse mock and disrupt the narrator's aspirations towards formal aesthetic autonomy, and yet they never allow realism, or the real, to become a stable *point d'appui* either. That is to say, while the exact detail of sense impression and geographical reference in Mahood's story suggests a gesture in the direction of realism, the imagery of excess, death and physical decay pushes realism until it reaches a limit and turns into the grotesque. To put this another way, although the deictic pointer 'here, in the Rue Brancion' seems initially to perform the standard, realist function of authenticating the story by virtue of an appeal to the actual, the ekphrastic link to the specifically surrealist image of the stockyards immediately undermines the generic stability upon which such an appeal depends. What had seemed to be a conventional attempt to ground the novel's formal excesses in the reality of a named district turns out instead to be a passage to a further terrain of hallucination and terror. The ekphrastic image is not allowed to play a determining role, anchoring the story in fact, but is rather another mode of the insurgency through which the novels' constant altercations between the interior and the exterior, subject and object are engendered.

The way that Beckett renders generic stability untenable reflects *The Unnameable*'s multiple reversals of, and challenges to, both Kantian aesthetics and the Greenbergian doctrines of autonomy that they enable. In the novel the judgement of taste is pictured not as 'impersonal and disinterested', but rather as stimulated by multiple, uncontrollable incursions of the outside. As the narrative voice puts it: 'for others the time-abolishing joys of impersonal and disinterested speculation. I only think, if that is the name for this vertiginous panic as of hornets smoked out of their nest, once a certain degree of terror has been exceeded'.⁴⁵ This clear reference to Kant is just one of the many occasions in the book when the

⁴⁵ Beckett (1979), p. 322.

failure of autonomy in the face of an exterior element (as the metaphor of the hornets being disturbed strongly suggests) is recorded. Indeed the association of the slaughterhouse district with food, eating and bodily gratification provides an opportunity to see language itself as such a usurping force. Thus, of the words he is obliged to share, and the community that the very idea of language implies, the narrator writes:

[n]ot to be able to open my mouth without proclaiming them, and our fellowship, that's what they imagine they'll have me reduced to. It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed.⁴⁶

Beckett's refusal of the collectivity attendant on the universality of aesthetic 'taste' is never more clearly articulated than here. To make an impersonal, disinterested judgement is, paradoxically, to speak the impure language of the tribe, and be co-opted by it. The excessive images of gluttony, blood and flies of the Rue Brancion thus act as a sensuous, material reminder of the predicament that *The Unnameable* constantly returns to. Despite the narrator's urge towards the purity of isolation, the modernist fantasy of autonomy – and the desire for generic integrity that is its counterpart – always takes place amongst the savage uproar of the everyday, the historical and the commercial. There is a remarkable congruence between all this and Adorno's model of the artwork in *Aesthetic Theory*, where he too draws on Leibniz to figure the contradictions of post-War art:

[t]he artwork is both the result of the process and the process itself at a standstill. It is what at its apogee rationalist metaphysics proclaimed as the principle of the universe, a monad: at once a force field and a thing. Artworks are closed to one another, blind, and yet in their hermeticism they represent what is external.⁴⁷

Adorno's celebrated examination of Beckett's *Endgame* also explores the intriguing parallels between the two men's aesthetics, and it is to this essay that we now turn.

When Beckett begins to work in the theatre in the early 1950s, he finds a new way of addressing the questions he had been grappling with in his prose, one that takes full advantage of the physical presence of the body as an object on the stage. The sculptural qualities of the images of the Memnon figure and Mahood's vitrine are replicated in the frozen tableaux

⁴⁶ Beckett (1979), p. 298.

⁴⁷ Adorno (2002), p. 179.

of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape*. In his essay on *Endgame*, Adorno picks up on Beckett's representation of subject and object in a way that can be helpful here. As part of a critique of the neo-Kantian philosopher (and tutor to Walter Benjamin) Heinrich Rickert, Adorno considers the possibility of the work of art communicating a truth that is not just a subjective 'projection' on the part of the beholder. Here Adorno is emphasizing how, for the Kantian tradition to which Rickert adheres, the formal, transcendental aspects of the work of art are its true content. The only aspect of the aesthetic encounter that can, in Adorno's summary, be 'communicated' to others is the way an artwork reveals the conditions for the very possibility of experience. These conditions are what Adorno calls the 'physiognomy of the objective mind'. In such an understanding of art, Adorno argues, '[t]he situations say something, but what?'⁴⁸ In other words, Rickert sees the essence of art as communication, even though there can be no absolute consensus as to the content of that communication, only about the shared formal conditions which make experience 'sayable', intelligible.

Beckett's work breaks from such a Kantian aesthetic, for Adorno, just as his own aesthetics does, and he finds a marvellously dialectical means of stating that departure. Rather than there being a communication without content, in *Endgame* there is content without communication. That is to say, Beckett takes images from everyday life and decontextualizes them, so that they are presented to us in such a manner that, while their manifest content is immediately, indeed unavoidably, recognizable to us, we are prevented from entering into a relation of intelligibility with them. As Adorno puts it 'what is otherwise entrenched behind a communicative facade is . . . condemned merely to appear'.⁴⁹ The presumption of a pure, formal quality of relation between artwork and audience disintegrates. Instead there is simply the brute, material fact of the object-world, with no meaningful way of framing or organizing it. This is what Adorno calls 'the physiognomy of what is no longer human'.⁵⁰

Such a notion of an inhuman physiognomy cannot but remind one of the image of the dead Father's face in 'First Love', just as the notion of something that 'merely appears' recalls 'Le Monde et le Pantalon' with its ignorance of 'all that is not appearance'. Here the breakdown of universality means that Rickert's 'physiognomic' projection of the human face and a transcendental unity of apperception onto the world is stood on its head, so that the opposite happens: the atomized, nominalist, particular world

⁴⁸ Adorno (1982), pp. 119–150, p. 131.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

of the inhuman colonizes the face, rendering it unreadable. This is the artwork as monad.

Adorno's analysis becomes clearer, and more immediately relevant to Beckett's visual aesthetics, if we attend to the example that he provides us with:

[t]here sticks in Beckett's memory something like an apoplectic middle-aged man taking his midday nap, with a cloth over his eyes to keep out the light or the flies; it makes him unrecognizable. This image – average and optically barely unusual – becomes a sign only for that gaze which perceives the face's loss of identity, sees the possibility that being concealed is the face of a dead man, and becomes aware of the repulsive nature of that physical concern which reduces the man to his body and places him already among corpses.⁵¹

Adorno's reading can be productively allied to our examination of Beckett's relationship to modernist poetics. As we have seen in previous chapters, Beckett's early aesthetic is conventionally modernist in that he valorizes the sensuous, physical qualities of the image above the dictates of the universalizing, abstracting concept. He then moves away from this position to define the unmediated image in negative rather than positive terms, associating it with mineralization, petrification and the frozen monad. In *Endgame*, for Adorno the Marxist, the same development has come to pass tragically, as an effect of the collapse of the very possibility of a confident universalizing bourgeois subjectivity in late-capitalist conditions. In Hamm, the dreaming figure depicted with such subtle sympathy in Sapo's version of a Dutch genre painting is reduced to the absolute materiality of a corpse, resistant to any relation of empathy other than the recognition of a loss of identity. Adorno thus grasps the relationship between abstraction and figuration in Beckett's use of the visual, his attraction to images that seem conventionally mimetic, but which are evacuated of content and rendered undecidable.

Adorno's reading of *Endgame* certainly captures that aspect of the Beckettian image, most clearly advanced in the Cézanne letters, that stresses blankness and an unforgiving, mineralized materiality. However, it neglects the way in which Hamm's withdrawal is balanced by more suggestive forms of the suspension or erasure of identity elsewhere in the oeuvre. Beckett's vestigial adherence to a modernist poetics of immersion, the ambiguities surrounding his notion of prayer, the ambiguous relation

⁵¹ *Ibid.* For the distinction between sign and image that Adorno is making here see Horkheimer and Adorno (1987), pp. 17–18.

between inside and outside in *The Unnameable*, his sensitivity to psychology in the image of the absorbed face, all of these hint at an alternative to what he once called the 'world of stones'.⁵²

We can turn to another play in order to begin to explore this alternative. *Krapp's Last Tape* is a portrait of a single individual, the first of Beckett's plays to take this form. It is also, very obviously, a play of absorption and interiority (although, and this is characteristic of the dialectic of absorption and materiality that we find in Beckett, the said interiority is materialized externally in a machine). It is also the first really *still* Beckett play, the device of the tape recorder allowing Krapp to maintain a single absorbed pose for very long periods. As a result, Beckett is able to implement strategies that he had initially outlined twenty years earlier in his lectures on Racine: visual images, and in particular images of colour, at once coincide with and are separate from the body on the stage. The play as a whole demonstrates exactly that interrelation of abstraction and figuration, sense and form, that we have been pursuing throughout this book. Let's take one example to illustrate this. Krapp, alone on set, is bent over the tape recorder, totally absorbed: 'leaning forward, elbows on table, hand cupping ear towards machine, face front'.⁵³ He is listening to the following words:

I was there . . . when the blind was down, one of those dirty brown roller affairs, throwing a ball for a little white dog as chance would have it. I happened to look up and there it was. All over and done with, at last. I sat on for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. [Pause] Moments. Her moments. My moments. [Pause] The dog's moments. [Pause] In the end I held it out to him and he took it in his mouth, gently, gently. A small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball. [Pause] I shall feel it, in my hand, until my dying day. [Pause] I might have kept it. [Pause] But I gave it to the dog.⁵⁴

Here is one of the painterly tableaux and friezes with which Beckett experimented in his theatre from the early 1950s on. Krapp's static body, with its abstracted 'white face' and 'purple nose', white shirt and black waistcoat and trousers, is deeply immersed in the virtual space of the past. Beckett creates this virtual space through a series of highly sensuous, visual images that the play's audience must work imaginatively to superimpose on the physical body of the actor before them. In this way, the images carried by the tape-recorded speech gloss the physical body of the actor as

⁵² Knowlson (2003), p. 137.

⁵³ Beckett (1990), pp. 213–223, p. 217.

⁵⁴ Beckett (1990), p. 220.

Beckett had envisaged in 1931. The emphasis on black and white in the play's lighting, make-up and costume recur in the verbal description of the white dog and black ball to create a highly visual continuity between the material presence on stage and the imagined world of the past. Yet where the immediate visual world of the play is a *chiaroscuro* of space and abstraction, the virtual interior scene of memory mobilizes vision and touch to powerful emotional effect (although, typically this is also deflated through humour). Krapp's isolation, and his monadic existence in general, is captured marvellously in the image of the 'small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball' that he holds out to the dog and the dog 'gently' takes. A transaction of some sort occurs here: in the ball's passage a sensuous, materialized solitude is exchanged between the human and the non-human world. But more importantly, an analogous transaction takes place between audience and artwork. The audience actively completes the scene they watch by picturing the pathos of the past moment.

In moments like these in his plays Beckett draws on years of looking at and thinking about painting to create an art that touches and moves while never compromising the vision of atomization that is the degree zero of his work. The two poles of figuration and abstraction, empathic realism and alienating structural play, combine to create the depiction, in the tableau onstage, of absolute absorption that is nevertheless supplemented by the imaginative activity that the words on the tape set up and release in the beholder. In this way, the audience participates collectively in the experience of a monadic interiority: the play's relentless negation of the possibility of relation is paradoxically revealed through the profoundly relational labour it demands of its audience.

All Strange Away, written in 1964, is a fine example of how Beckett's visual aesthetic plays out in the later prose.⁵⁵ As with many of Beckett's short texts of the 1960s, his earlier descriptions of individuals in realist, domestic interiors have been replaced by a lone figure in an undifferentiated cube or box. Even so there are clear formal and thematic continuities. The narrator of this ferocious text describes a solitary character's existence within a white architectural space, yet the real purpose of the piece is a thorough exploration of the nature and potential of the literary image. The material, physiological, bodily nature of Beckett's understanding of the image is in evidence throughout in the writing's constant appeals to the reader's senses, the visual above all. *Chiaroscuro* effects of light and dark are very frequently emphasized, and the various positions of the

⁵⁵ Beckett (1995), pp. 169–181.

central character Emma/Emmo's body are described in diagrammatic terms that foreground the reader's processes of visual activation. The same processes are also thematized through the pornographic pictures on which the central figure gazes. This allows literary theories of the imagination, taking their bearing from Kantian aesthetics, to be sceptically interrogated. Thus the narrator appeals to a Coleridgean hierarchy in that, as the gender of the figure changes from Emmo to Emma, there is also a change from imagination and activity ('Imagine him kissing, caressing, licking, sucking, fucking and bugging all this stuff'), to fancy and passivity ('Fancy her being all kissed, licked, sucked, fucked and so on by all that').⁵⁶ The suggestion here is of the deep implication of traditional categories of the aesthetic in gendered power relations and the appetites of the libido. Once again the effect is to distance Beckett's materialist account of the imagination from the formalist or idealized theories of both Kant and Romanticism.⁵⁷

Even so the reader is almost always addressed in terms of the imagination and image-production, and this is stimulated pre-eminently through the eye. Take the following typical passage from this close-knit, experimental text:

[i]n dark and light. Slow fade of ivory flesh when ebb ten seconds and gone. Long black hair when light strewn over face and adjacent floor. Uncover right eye and cheekbone vivid white for long black lashes when light. Say again though no real image puckered tip of left breast, leave right a mere name.⁵⁸

Here one can see a close attention to temporality. The *chiaroscuro* effects signalled by the initial sentence suggest a static visual image, but this is immediately challenged by the 'slow fade of ivory flesh ten seconds and gone', a phrase that ambiguously refers to both the receding light source and the aging of the body. Countering this is an appeal to 'vivid', luminous details: images of hair, eye, cheekbone and lashes. These lines themselves are then succeeded by a 'saying again', which takes place now in the explicit absence of a 'real image'. Yet this 'saying' includes the intensely particular and evocative visual image of the 'puckered tip of left breast', which is overtly opposed to the 'mere name' of the right. Here Beckett

⁵⁶ An analysis of Beckett's use of these Romantic concepts is outside the scope of this book. For a useful account see Rodríguez (2007), pp. 131–142.

⁵⁷ Beckett read Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* in 1962 'without much pleasure'. See letter to Mary Hutchinson, 11 June 1962. A two volume 1958 edition edited by J. Shawcross for Oxford University Press survives in Beckett's Library. See Nixon and van Hulle (2013), p. 35.

⁵⁸ Beckett (1995), p. 174.

contrasts linguistic description to the concrete specificity of visual sense impression, suggesting that the literary image has a purchase where mere naming does not. And once again, the puckered breast may suggest that it is the image's sensitivity to the body and its desires and drives that lends it its force. The upshot is a fraught and intricate series of transactions between image and process, concept and percept that successfully thematizes a range of concerns that we have also seen in Beckett's earlier ekphrastic fictions.

All Strange Away also retains a formalist account of the relation between imagination and its objects, one that again stages a version of the Kantian aesthetic that haunts Beckett's work, particularly those texts dealing with the visual:

the glaring eyes now clearer still in that flashes of vision few and far now rive their unseeingness. So for example as chance may have it on the ceiling a flyspeck or the insect itself or a strand of Emma's motte. Then lost and all the remaining field for hours of time on earth. Imagination dead imagine to lodge for a second in that glare a dying common house or dying window fly, then fall the five feet to the dust and die or die and fall. No, no image, no fly here, no life or dying here but his, a speck of dirt.⁵⁹

The mention of the 'remaining field' here speaks back to the notion of the 'interior field' of vision that we saw in 'Les Peintures des van Veldes'. But Beckett's fly on the ceiling also has a precise literary, modernist lineage, drawing on Yeats' famous 1937 statement in the introduction to his *Oxford Book of Poetry*:

[i]t has sometimes seemed of late years [...] as if the poet could at any moment write a poem by recording the fortuitous scene or thought, perhaps it might be enough to put into some fashionable rhythm – I am sitting in a chair, there are three dead flies on a corner of the ceiling.⁶⁰

In doing so, Beckett situates his text as another moment in his *agon* with the modernist image and philosophical aesthetics more generally.

Returning to the passage last quoted from *All Strange Away*, I want to explore this *agon* by considering the line 'Imagination dead imagine'. This locution, important enough for Beckett to extract it from the text and use as the title of a subsequent work, again enacts a fascinated, yet heretical, relation to Kantian aesthetic formalism.⁶¹ Where Kant sees aesthetic pleasure as being produced by the experience of indeterminacy in the

⁵⁹ Beckett (1995), p. 172. My italics.

⁶⁰ Yeats (1936), pp. xxvii–xxviii.

⁶¹ Beckett (1995), pp. 182–185.

interaction of the faculties, Beckett here understands this experience in more radical terms as the death of imagination, effectively pushing the beautiful into the realm of the sublime. Yet in *All Strange Away*, rather than the sublime object, Beckett's imagination batters onto a pubic hair or an insect. Like the fly on the vase in van Huysum's vanitas, the painting alluded to in 'Malacoda', the insect summons the inevitability of death and decay, the absolute limits of the human, insinuating temporality into the Kantian schema. Similarly, the pubic hair signals the exorbitant automatism of desire, so that Kant's dictum that aesthetic judgement be cordoned off from the physiological appetites is also flouted. In each case Kantian aesthetic formalism is deliberately contaminated by time, history and the body, and yet, here and elsewhere, the fundamental terms of that formalism are retained, even if only as limits to be transgressed. 'Imagination Dead Imagine': these three words themselves sketch in the basic co-ordinates of Beckett's examination of the aesthetic, and *All Strange Away* once again makes clear the centrality of the visual image to that examination. Crucially, however, although it is a text that seems the epitome of what critics routinely refer to as Beckett's abstraction or minimalism, its investigation of formal structures of language, perception and judgement are always caught up with the recalcitrance of the real, this latter figured predominantly as the human body with its sensations, memories and desires. *All Strange Away*'s use of the pornographic image is just one example of Beckett's specifically *sordid* abstraction, one that is at odds with the associations of abstraction with formalism, transcendence and the autonomous artwork.

Andrew Gibson has homed in on the series of texts published in the late 1950s and 1960s as constituting a key moment in Beckett's career. As Gibson puts it, at this juncture 'a truly abstract Beckett finally emerged', and he cites *Imagination Dead Imagine*, as well as *Ping*, *Enough*, *Lessness* and *The Lost Ones*.⁶² It is worth noting that many of these texts were published in Barney Rosset's *Evergreen* and *Evergreen Review* between 1957 and 1970, precisely the years in which the movement later termed 'minimalism' rose to prominence. Rosset himself had significant links to the New York art world, the epicentre of minimalism, through his wife, the painter Joan Mitchel. *The Lost Ones*, meanwhile, was staged in New York in 1973 by Mabou Mines, a company that also had deep connections with conceptual and performance artists. The same company's productions of *Play* and *Come and Go* in April 1972 took place, significantly, at the

⁶² Gibson (2010), p. 133.

Whitney Museum of Modern Art. There is thus a historical and geographical conjunction between Beckett's turn to what Gibson calls the 'abstract' and the emergence of minimalism, and this is why Beckett's work has often been seen as itself minimalist.⁶³ This equation is something that I want to strongly contest, however, not least because it pushes Beckett's work back into the formalist, modernist mode that his work departs from.

Susan Sontag's 1967 essay 'The Aesthetics of Silence' is an important document for our purposes here. Sontag's essay identified those aspects of Beckett's art congenial to a minimalist aesthetic at the very moment when the latter was being critically defined for the first time.⁶⁴ Sontag is working in the shadow of Clement Greenberg's aesthetics: aspects of her sensibility are clearly informed by the idea of the autonomy of the artwork, for example. At the same time she is critical of Greenberg, and this is borne out by her interest in multimedia events and mass culture. While Sontag never refers to individual artworks in the essay, her use of the word *minimal* directs the reader towards artists of the period like Sol le Witt and Frank Stella who have often been associated with Beckett. Hence she refers to 'a current predilection for the construction of "minimal" forms which seem to lack emotional resonance' and later suggests that 'the attachment of contemporary art to the "minimal" narrative principle of the catalogue or inventory seems almost a parody of the capitalist world-view, in which the environment is atomized into "items"'.⁶⁵

Sontag also introduces numerous quotes from *Three Dialogues*, which had been published in New York in 1960 as part of the Evergreen Gallery publication *Bram van Velde*.⁶⁶ She does not, however, imply Beckett's relevance to contemporary art solely through such pronouncements, but also probes the writing itself. The central term that I want to draw attention to is that of the 'literal', which Sontag uses to examine something closely akin to what Beckett called nominalism in the Kaun letter. Hence Sontag writes:

'[m]eaning' partially or totally converted into 'use' is the secret behind the widespread strategy of literalness, a major development of the aesthetics of silence. A variant on this: hidden literality, exemplified by such different writers as Kafka and Beckett. The narratives of Kafka and Beckett seem puzzling because they appear to invite the reader to ascribe high-powered symbolic and allegorical meanings to them and, at the same time, repel such

⁶³ See, for example, Cunningham (2003), pp. 29–41. ⁶⁴ Sontag (2002), pp. 3–35.

⁶⁵ Sontag (2002), p. 16. ⁶⁶ Beckett, Duthuit and Putman (1960).

ascriptions. The truth is that their language, when it is examined, discloses no more than what it literally means. The power of their language derives precisely from the fact that the meaning is so bare.⁶⁷

This is a highly suggestive formulation that recalls several of Beckett's characteristic strategies, most importantly the way he is attracted to formal devices that reduce signs to their material immediacy: marks on a page, paint on a flat surface, light and dark. As Sontag points out, this procedure has a double consequence; the work's openness seems to solicit interpretation and promise meaning, and yet at the same time it is experienced as stubbornly resistant and enigmatic.

This is a version of the modernist duality that I described at the beginning of this chapter: on the one hand there is the aspiration to a direct, elemental form of communication that bypasses mediation, and on the other a devotion to the radical dismantling of the sign-system and an understanding of all forms of representation as socially constructed. The first term in this duality describes the high modernist corpus that privileges the sensuous intelligence and draws deeply on Bergson. We have traced it in this book from Salon Cubism, through German empathy theory to certain aspects of French, non-figurative late modernist painting.

As I have been arguing, Beckett, too, owes something to this tradition, yet there is a strong countervailing, and ultimately dominant, imperative in his thought that sees the aesthetic object as alienated, withdrawn and remote. The value of Sontag's descriptions of 'the literal' is that it connects this latter resistant quality to Beckett's appropriation of the everyday operations of language. For Sontag, silently drawing on Wittgenstein's distinction between meaning and use in *Philosophical Investigations*, Beckett's writing attempts to constrain language and expression by emphasizing, through various devices (Sontag's primary example is the list or catalogue), its practical, everyday, transitive functions. Wittgenstein sees meaning as contingent on language use in context, on its deployment in a specific situation with a specific audience. In such circumstances 'meaning is . . . bare', in Sontag's words, because it is so strictly determined by these specifics. By reading Beckett in this way Sontag suggests that Vladimir and Estragon's banter, for example, does not refer ultimately to extrinsic metaphysical referents, but is rather a record of the kind of language games played in certain everyday situations. There is thus some degree of modernist fidelity to the medium in Beckett's work, but it is a fidelity to the

⁶⁷ Sontag (2002), p. 18.

dependence of language on the social. This has clear implications for the central late-modernist relationship between medium-specificity and aesthetic autonomy. For Greenberg, the notion of fidelity to material is interpreted as a means of securing the purity and primacy of the artwork. For Sontag, however, fidelity to language at its level of *use* has the opposite effect, existing in an absolute contiguity between text and everyday life. The juxtaposition of Greenberg and Sontag thus suggests the way Beckett's resistant artworks, while certainly being themselves material resistant things, are made out of elements that are social.

As argued earlier in this chapter with reference to *The Unnameable*, this distance from a modernist version of aesthetic autonomy is also borne out in the way that even Beckett's most seemingly abstract texts are entangled with the forms and procedures of realism. A good example of this is *Not I*. On one level this play is a very clear example of Beckett's relationship with high modernist ideas. In his *Romantic Image*, Frank Kermode argues that the 'cult of the dead face' had a special place in the evolution of such a modernism. Through an examination of the work of Pater, Wilde, Hulme and Yeats, Kermode posits the severed head of John the Baptist as a kind of template for the modernist image, and as a consequence the story of Salome as a pivotal narrative for modernist writers. Given this, Beckett's 1971 visit to the Oratory of St. John's Cathedral in Valletta, Malta, assumes a certain significance. After spending an hour in front of Caravaggio's *The Decollation of St. John the Baptist*, Beckett sent several reproductions as postcards to friends, commenting on its importance. One can imagine him scrutinizing each of the seven figures in turn: Salome with her platter held ready for the saint's head, the horrified old woman beside her, the jailer calmly overseeing the event, the executioner with his long muscular back (for this is another dorsal composition), John himself and finally the two prisoners viewing the scene through a window on the right. Later Beckett would write to James Knowlson: 'Image of *Not I* in part suggested by Caravaggio's *Decollation of St John the Baptist*'.⁶⁸ How are we to account for this reference?

Given Beckett's interest in the use of darkness and light in painting, we might presume that the drama of its chiaroscuro attracted him to the *Decollation*, and that this is reflected in *Not I*'s powerful staging design. However, as mentioned earlier, it is also important to note the modernist interest in the content of the painting. The Salome narrative that Caravaggio draws upon is one that mid-to-late nineteenth-century writers

⁶⁸ Knowlson (1996), pp. 588–589.

found irresistible: Mallarmé, Huysmans and Wilde all based significant work upon it. Kermode argues that this interest extends into the twentieth century through Vorticism to W. B. Yeats' *A Full Moon in March* and *The King of the Great Clock Tower*.⁶⁹ In both of these plays a character is decapitated and a Queen dances before the head. For his final play, *The Death of Cuchulain*, Yeats again deploys the motif of the severed head, which this time takes the completely abstract form of a black parallelogram, before which the dance takes place. Significantly, Kermode points out the connections between this version of the modernist image and a rhetoric of the inorganic, the inhuman and abstraction: '[t]he Image has nothing to do with organic life, though it may appear to have; its purity of outline is possible only in a sphere far from that in which humanity constantly obtrudes its preoccupations. We look back . . . to the arbitrary, aniconic contours of a neoplatonic emblem, and forward to abstraction and the cult of Byzantium.'⁷⁰ Kermode does not mention Wilhelm Worringer, but there are clear connections between the elements of the modernist image that he identifies and Worringer's preoccupations and terminology.

Given the presence – through the reference to Caravaggio's painting – of the Salome myth in the hinterland of *Not I*, I want to keep Kermode's modernist abstraction of the head in mind as we turn to another, rather more contingent and unexpected visual source for the play. Enoch Brater recounts Beckett's memory of a trip to North Africa, where, while sitting outside a café, he noticed 'a solitary figure, completely covered in a djellaba, leaning against a wall. It seemed to him that the figure was in a position of intense listening.' Knowlson makes a very useful link between this figure and Caravaggio's painting by pointing out that just as the figure in the djellaba is described as intensely listening, so there is a figure in the painting who is intent on *not* listening: the old woman beside Salome, standing with her hands over her ears. As Knowlson puts it 'this old woman emerges as the figure in Caravaggio's masterpiece whose role comes closest to the Auditor in Beckett's play.'⁷¹

Taking Knowlson's comments a further step, we can note how the old woman and the figure in the djellaba are also linked by that precise combination of withdrawal and intense emotion that Michael Fried terms

⁶⁹ Beckett attended *The King of the Great Clock Tower* at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin on Saturday 4 August 1934 but disliked it: 'Balbus building his wall would be more dramatic.' Letter to MacGreevy, 7 August 1934, *LSBr*, pp. 216–219, p. 217.

⁷⁰ Kermode (1957), p. 64. ⁷¹ *Ibid.*

absorption. The old woman is a good example of Caravaggio's ability to paint characters that are so demonstrably caught up in their own emotions that they both invite and exclude us as viewers. Similarly, one can imagine Beckett mesmerized by the hooded figure he saw while on holiday in El Jadida, face and body entirely obscured from his view, abstracted by the all-enveloping folds of the djellaba, but in that very withdrawal soliciting the beholder's speculation. One possible imagistic link between the *Decollation* and the figure in the djellaba is Zubaran's *St. Francis in Meditation*, another example of *chiaroscuro* from an artist profoundly indebted to Caravaggio. Beckett would have passed it regularly during his visits to London's National Gallery in the mid-1930s.⁷²

Yet there is a second face in the painting which must also surely be considered as a source: the pale and hollow-eyed profile of the Baptist himself, caught just as it is severed from the body. Here is an image of the ultimate withdrawal, one that looks forward to the modernist refusals of Manet's *Déjeuner* and Yeats' parallelogram rather than the rich interiority of the Dutch portraiture that drew so heavily on Caravaggio. If the painted, realist images of absorbed faces that attracted Beckett throughout his life play their part in the genesis of some of his later plays, they are always in dialogue with starker, more rebarbative images such as this. Indeed the oscillation between the faces of John and the old woman, between absorption and abstraction let us say, might be the ultimate determining factor in Beckett's attraction to Caravaggio's picture.

We find a much more overtly thematized example of the relationship between abstraction and figuration, empathy and autonomy in the final text that we will consider, *Ohio Impromptu*. Early drafts towards the play feature a single head, rather than the two figures of the final draft.⁷³ The concentration on the head here, together with an emphasis on its pierrot-like white face and black skull cap situate this image in that terrain of deathly, expressionless, stony heads that populate Beckett's work. Very soon after, however, the figure's hands appear and it becomes apparent that he is trying to thread a needle. The initial stark image is thus set into motion in pursuit of an everyday practice: a practice needing concentration, patience and absorption. Sewing, or threading a needle, is a practice commonly depicted in Dutch genre painting. We could cite, among many other images, Judith Leyster's *Woman Sewing by Candlelight*, which hangs in the National Gallery in Dublin and which Beckett lists in the art notebook from the mid-1930s. Or Gottfried Schalken's *Girl*

⁷² Beckett (1992), p. 64.

⁷³ UoR MSS DRAMA/OHI.

Threading a Needle by Candlelight, which hangs in the Wallace collection in London, and is also listed in the notebook.⁷⁴

Behind the deathly expressionist pallor of the draft's initial figure, in other words, trembles an image that might be taken from realist painting. The text thus moves from a first highly artificial, expressionist, alienating image, starkly defined in a spotlight, to an intimate, delicate and vulnerable scene of concentration in everyday life. One of the things that attracts Beckett to Dutch portraiture, I suggest, is a certain ambivalence in its address to the beholder, a sense that the forms of evasion and reticence necessary for the depiction of absorption can very easily lapse into complete withdrawal, so that behind the bourgeois interiority of the genre portrait the mineralized death's head is always waiting, and (crucially) vice versa. So it is no coincidence that we find a version of the same movement in *Ohio Impromptu* as published, now featuring two figures based, Avigdor Arik has suggested, on another Dutch painting, Gerard Terborch's *Four Franciscan Monks*, also hanging in Dublin.⁷⁵ The following is from the final speech:

[s]o the sad tale a last time told they sat on as though turned to stone. Through the single window dawn shed no light. From the street no sound of reawakening. Or was it that buried in who knows what thoughts they paid no heed? To light of day. To sound of reawakening. What thoughts who knows. Thoughts, no, not thoughts. Profounds of mind. Buried in who knows what profounds of mind. Of mindlessness. Whither no light can reach. No sound. So sat on as though turned to stone.⁷⁶

The image of two individuals sitting on 'as though turned to stone' echoes Beckett's previous rhetoric of inorganicism and mineralization, traced in this book through his comments on Cézanne, Yeats and Watteau. It is another iteration of the Leibnizian ontology that Beckett explored most consistently and productively in his writing on Bram van Velde in the 1940s. Although the phrase 'turned to stone' is repeated at the end of the passage, however, it is not the last word, for the narrative voice also suggests an alternative reading, one that recalls absorption rather than petrification: perhaps these figures are 'buried in who knows what thoughts', a rich inner life that may give the lie to their apparent catatonia, and with which an audience might empathise. The phrase 'profounds of mind' adds a particular force and weight to a sense of a deep, though mutually implicated, emotional solitude. And yet this description too is

⁷⁴ UoR MS5001.

⁷⁵ See Arik (2001), p. 6.

⁷⁶ Beckett (1990), pp. 447–448.

compromised immediately by what follows – these are not ‘profound of mind’, but of ‘mindlessness’. In this way, the passage as a whole enacts an indeterminate movement between interiority and exteriority, thematizing the kind of ambivalence between empathy and abstraction, communication and autonomy that Beckett’s work explores so deftly. That all this is played out in front of an audience, forced into a relation with the motionless tableau of the figures onstage, reinforces this book’s suggestion that the act of standing before an image underpins Beckett’s thinking in a paradigmatic way. Even before the question of the subject–object relation, on which Beckett’s critics have expended so much energy, it is the act of looking at a painting that forms both the intimate core and ultimate horizon of his art. But as this book has also demonstrated, the evolution of that activity of looking is itself determined by the history and politics of the times and the places – Ireland, Germany, France – in which Beckett lived.

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